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Vol. XXXI.



"GHOST OF SOLOMON!" EXCLAIMED AJAX. "SIBYL OF PERDITION!" ADDED BOSCOBEL.

Kit Bandy Rattled; OR, THE INFANT GIANT.

BY OLL COOMES,
AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND JOE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AMATEUR HUNTERS IN TROUBLE.

THE red September sun had gone down behind the distant mountain range. The shadows of evening were gathering over the plains and settling thick and murky in the valleys and canyons of the great rugged mountains, and those mystic voices that seemed to come from the mighty realms of night had begun their weird, monotonous song when two horsemen drew rein in Elkhorn Canyon at a point where a little stream came brawling down the hillside and plunged into a limpid pool.

"Here we are, Frank, at the pool of Siloam."

The speaker was a young man of not more than twenty, and Frank Damon, the man addressed, was but a few years his senior. Both were strong, stalwart fellows, with the ruddy glow of health on their faces, and the light of impulsive youth sparkling in their eyes.

They were dressed in the garb of the border, armed with weapons new and shiny. Both were mounted upon mustang ponies caparisoned with bridles and saddles that had evidently seen but little service. But one familiar with the men and ways of the mountains would have seen that neither of them was a mountaineer. In fact, neither was. Both were amateurs in the mountains of Montana—there for the first time. They were not there alone, however; two friends were coming a short way behind, and one of them, Bob Boscobel, was their guide—the man of all others, whose perfect knowledge of the great hills, they were traversing, assured the hunters of all the sport that wild region would yield.

"Yes, friend Randall," Frank Damon said, in answer to his companion's remark, "I presume this is where we are to camp for the night. There's water before us for man and beast, and abundance of wood all around us."

"All very true, Frank; but suppose we wait until the boys come up before dismounting?" suggested Dick Randall.

"All right," responded Damon, baring his head to the cooling breeze, "for I reckon we're getting into a country now where we can't be too careful."

Scarcely had the words fallen from his lips when the crash of two or three rifles assailed their ears. A sharp cry of pain burst from Damon's lips. He dropped his hat to the ground, and clutched wildly at the horn of his saddle for support, crying out:

"My God! Dick, they have shot me!"

The report of the guns was followed by the war-whoop of Indians, the sound of which frightened the ponies and sent them flying down the valley. Dick Randall rode close alongside his friend and held his swaying form in the saddle.

They soon met Boscobel and Perry Thorne, who whirled their ponies and joined them in flight.

Blood was trickling from Damon's right sleeve and oozing like beads of sweat from the bosom of his shirt. At least two bullets had hit him, but being a plucky fellow, with nerves of steel, he sustained the shock like a veteran and kept his seat in the saddle.

So close and hard were the Indians pursuing that not a thing could be done toward stanching his bleeding wounds.

Boscobel's greatest hope for Damon lay in the fast-gathering gloom. If the young man could hold out a few minutes longer, they could evade the savages in the darkness. This fact he communicated to Frank. The latter shook his head.

"Boys," he said, faintly, "I am very weak; tie me in my saddle and I will stay with you, living or dead."

Every horse was urged into an extra burst of speed which carried them at a fair distance in advance of the foe. Then Dick Randall took a rope from his saddle, dismounted, and, running along at the side of Damon's horse, proceeded to tie the wounded man in his saddle. He had to work under great difficulties, but finally accomplished his task and resumed his seat in the saddle.

But by this time the savages had come so close upon them that the situation was becoming alarming. Urging their ponies to their utmost speed the whites gained slightly upon the foe,

and finally dashed into a stretch of pine timber where the shadows were black as midnight.

This was unexpected, and the fugitives were momentarily confused, during which time they became separated. The strap with which Randall was leading Damon's horse was snatched out of his hand by an interposing tree. Their pursuers were close upon them.

"Keep down the canyon! Keep down the canyon!" shouted Boscobel, urging on his horse.

He was soon joined by Randall and Thorne, but Damon was not with them! Boscobel called to him. The Indians answered with a demoniac yell. The three men waited as long as they dared, then rode on with heavy hearts.

The savages seemed not only perfectly familiar with the canyon, but possessed of the feline power of seeing in the dark, and experienced none of the difficulties in the pursuit which the whites seemed to meet at every turn in their flight.

The outcome of it was that the fugitives were finally forced to abandon their saddles and take to the hills to elude the red-skins. They took with them their blankets and an extra supply of ammunition. All the rest of the latter they concealed and then, as the foe dashed on down the canyon in pursuit of the riderless horses, Boscobel remarked:

"Now, boys, we've got to improve our time. The red demons will soon discover that we're side-tracked and'll come howlin' back like hounds on a trail. We'll not give 'em the slip so easy next time."

"But what about Damon, Bob?" questioned Thorne.

"I'm afraid poor Frank's gone under afore this. He was badly hurt and awful weak from loss of blood. But be he dead or alive, boys, we'll do our duty. We'll never leave these hills till we know Frank Damon's beyond our help. I don't believe the Injins found him, else we'd hear some demonstrations up that way. But if they hav'n't got him, where could he have vanished to so slick as to dodge them cat-eyed cut-throats?"

"Poor, brave, jolly Frank Damon!" said Thorne, sorrowfully. "I am afraid we'll never see him alive again; and, oh! to have to carry the news of his sad death to his father and mother!"

By this time it was deep darkness. Without further delay the hunters set off up the canyon. They had not gone far when the red-skins were heard returning. Concealing themselves until the savages had passed, the trio resumed their tramp. They soon came to where they had been separated from Damon, and made a careful search for him. But they could find neither man nor horse, nor any trace of either.

Finally they went into camp for the night, and early the next morning resumed the search for their friend. All day they kept it up, and night closed in again with no tidings of the missing man.

The next day their search was extended further out, and on the third still further, but with no better success. Horse and rider had disappeared as effectually as if dissolved into the shadows of night.

"Boys," young Boscobel finally observed, "it must be, after all, that Frank fell into the Indians' clutches."

"Then if so," responded Randall, "he is either dead or a captive, with the chances ten to one in favor of the former. But, how are we to ascertain the facts?"

"Go at once to the Indian village," declared Bob; "it's only two or three days' journey on foot to the north of us."

To this proposition the others consented, and they at once set off on the trip.

They were three days making this journey, coming in sight of the Indian town on the evening of the third day.

They kept closely under cover during the day and made reconnaissances under the shadows of night. The plan they had formulated for gaining the desired information was to capture a lone red-skin or white renegade, and, by bribery, or threats, if need be, extort from him the truth. And, if they found that Damon was still alive and a captive, they hoped to effect his release by the same means;—by bribery, if possible; by strategy and a fight if necessary.

But, day after day and night after night went by, and not a single red-skin or renegade could they catch out at a safe distance from the village.

This finally grew monotonous. Owing to the fact that the spies dare not fire a gun, nor strike a fire, they had been compelled to get along on close rations; and so, finally, the necessity of replenishing their food stock was forced upon

them, and one evening they decided to start the next morning back into the mountains.

Before that time arrived an incident or two occurred changing their entire plans.

CHAPTER II.

A DUAL STRUGGLE IN THE DARK.

BOSCOBEL and his two friends, Thorne and Randall, were concealed in a little depression on the hillside overlooking the Indian village. A dense thicket of bushes afforded them excellent cover. On either side of their retreat little ridges rose up quite sharply. A few scattering pines grew upon each.

At an hour when the amateurs believed everybody but themselves were asleep, they were suddenly startled by the sight of the half-crouching form of a skulking Indian on the crest of the ridge to their right, and not over three rods away.

What the fellow was up to they, of course, could not tell; and so long as their retreat was not threatened with invasion they deemed it best to remain quiet. That the red-skin was a scout and that his suspicions had been aroused by something or other, was evident from his stealthy movements, but the amateurs could hardly think that they were the object of his midnight search.

All doubts, however, were suddenly put to rest by the sight of a second figure leaping out from the darkness of a bush and springing like a panther upon the first.

Then it was that the first sound reached the watchers' ears, but instead, as they had expected, a yell, they heard a dull blow, a stifled moan and the quick shuffling of moccasined feet, all of which told that the shadows were engaged in a silent hand-to-hand fight.

Boscobel and his comrades drew their revolvers, for they knew not what moment they might need them. Moreover, they felt assured that the red-skin's antagonist must be a friend, and Bob had made up his mind to take a hand in the conflict when they saw the combatants fall to the earth and come rolling down toward them locked in a deadly embrace.

So dark was it and so rapid the evolutions of the foes that the amateurs could not distinguish one from the other. They fought in perfect silence as far as the use of their lungs were concerned; but it was evident from the gasping and wheezing of one or both of them that their lung-power had been pretty effectually shut off.

Unless obstructed by the bushes the combatants must roll down to the very covert of the whites; but, at that moment, the hunters' ears were greeted by another noise that came from the main hillside behind them.

Peering through the bushes they discerned what appeared to be a second hand-to-hand struggle going on in the same silent way, though several persons seemed to be engaged in it; and obeying the laws of gravitation, they, too, were whirling down the hill and must soon bring up at the feet of the watching trio.

"Boys," whispered Randall, excitedly, "isn't it rather singular that these two are fighting here at the same time and in the silent way they are?"

"I'm afraid it's a ruse of the red-skins to entrap us," declared Boscobel; "they're all tumbling this way—ay! look sharp, boys! here they are!"

The first two from the ridge came rolling into the bushes, and, almost at the same moment, those from the hillside came crashing in also.

The three drew back, revolvers in hand, to await developments. They were soon convinced that a genuine fight to the death was in progress, but friends and foes were so mixed up in the darkness that they could offer no assistance, and so prudently kept still.

For fully a minute more the struggle continued; blows, kicks, wheezings and low-muttered curses greeting the ears of the astounded amateurs; but at length the struggle grew less fierce. It had almost ceased when a Titan form could be faintly seen to rise to a kneeling posture and was heard draw a long breath of relief. At the same moment a voice a little beyond him was heard to say:

"Thar, you red-rinded varmint! try to hull the ha'r off Tom Rattler's skulp ag'in, will ye?"

Instantly the Titan form sprang to its feet, and in a low voice exclaimed:

"Tom Rattler?"

There was a movement in the bushes, the click of a revolver followed by the demand:

"Who speaks my name?"

"I, Ajax, the Infant Giant," was the answer.

"By the great Rosycrusians! what are you doin' her?"

"Obeyin' the laws of gravitation, I rolled in

here from the hillside with a pair of red-skin by the throat," was the answer.

"And I came here the same way with one red-rind," responded Rattler, for he the man was: "an' he's deader'n the grandma o' Adam. Ajax, shove your paw this way. Glad to meet you—hurt?"

"Bruised a little; that is all; but it's rather a queer meetin', Tom."

"I'd proclomate it ar', but I'm feerociously glad to meet you, Ajax, you big lubber!"

At this stage of the conversation Boscobel concluded to make their presence known, and in a low voice called out:

"Hullo, there, men!"

Instantly the two men became silent.

"Take it easy, folks," Boscobel added; "we're friends."

"That's good!" said Ajax, advancing toward them; "who are you? what are you doin' here?—roll in with an Injin?"

Boscobel introduced himself and friends. The two mountaineers greeted them warmly.

"We've been here all night," Bob added; "we saw the beginning of the fight on the knoll, but the one on the hillside was under way when we first discovered the combatants. At first we thought it an Injun trick to trap us, but, when you dashed into this thicket like rival avalanches, puffing and wheezing, kicking and pounding, we saw it was a real old grizzly bear fight. We'd like to have taken a hand in it, but the darkness prevented."

"Wal, it's all right, boys," said Tom Rattler; "that red-rind imp didn't know an untamed tempest from a mountain zephyr. He'd been shadowin' me all night, and I finally laid for him, and, when the chance came, I thumbed his jugular to save a racket and—well, here I be, and there he lays in sweet repose. But now, Ajax, you old, spiral whirlwind, you must give a correct account o' yourself and o' your presence here."

"I came here," answered Ajax, "under 'bout the same circumstances you did, 'cept I had more company. I've been kep'in' an eye on them Injins for a week or two in the interest of a gang of prospectors over east."

"Well, our story is rather lengthy," supplemented Boscobel, "and as it's getting late, and we're in pretty close to a hornets' nest, maybe we'd better fall back into the hills without further delay."

"That's a pint well taken," assented Rattler; "we might git our heads hulled tarryin' here. I'll run back up the tempest's track and get some fightin' tools I left there, and then I'll be ready to put space atwixt us and that red-rind nest."

"I have a rifle and a revolver or two strewed along that hillside, also," observed Ajax, "and I'll gather 'em in and then I'll be ready to march."

It required but a few moments for the mountaineers to secure their weapons, when the five set off over the ridge toward the east.

Daylight came upon them about five miles from the Indian village, when the amateurs had a fair look at the faces of their new friends.

The fame of Ajax, the Infant Giant, had been quite familiar to Bob Boscobel, but it was the first time he had ever met the young Hercules of the Hills. Nor was he at all disappointed in the man. Aside from his splendid physical proportions, there was a good-natured expression upon his big, boyish face that told of a jolly good fellowship, a kind heart and impulsive spirit.

By the side of the young giant old Tom Rattler was a midget, yet all readily saw that he was a host within himself. Quick, nervous and ever cautious, with a keen eye in which there was an expression suggestive of a rollicking spirit, and short, blunt and whimsical manner of speech, he was the amateurs' ideal of an old border-man.

The sight of a young deer, as they were walking along, suggested the idea of breakfast, and, quicker than a flash, almost, Rattler's rifle was at his shoulder and the game brought down.

A fire was lighted and some of the venison broiled, and while they were partaking of their repast, Boscobel narrated the story of their surprise by Indians, the wounding of Damon, his mysterious disappearance and the object of their visit to the Indian village.

"Boys," remarked Tom Rattler, when he had finished his story, "you needn't look any furd for your friend in that town. He's not there."

The old hunter spoke in a tone so positive that there was no doubt left in the minds of the three companions as to his knowledge of what he said.

"Then," said Randall, "if you are sure he is

not there, perhaps you can give us some tidings of him."

Taking a bite of meat on the point of his knife the old hunter placed it to his mouth, shaking his head. After a moment's pause he replied:

"I know he's not 'mong the Ingins, for I waded thro' their hull flea-nest lookin' for an old friend who I heard was a captive there."

"What was your friend's name, Tom?" queried Ajax.

"Bandy—Old Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective!"

"Then let me tell you," declared Ajax, "that you needn't look any furd for your friend, for Kit Bandy's dead."

"Great Rosycrusians!" cried the old man, dropping his hands to his knees; "Kit Bandy dead?"

"Deader'n Pocahontas, I'm sorry to say. He was hung by the Bonnet-Monday Outlaws. His body was found hangin' in a gulch near Bowlder City, with a card pinned to it, warning all detectives to keep out of Montana."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Old Tom, "this surely can't be, 'Jax!"

"I never saw Bandy livin'," the Infant went on, "but I saw the body after it was brought in for burial. I heard fifty men, at least, say it was Bandy. I guess it was him without a doubt."

"Dear! dear! dear!" sighed the old borderer, "can it be possible that Old Kit's dead? Boys, that news goes to my heart like a knife. I loved that old sinner as a twin brother. The world will never, never know another Kit Bandy. He was all heart, all fun, all fight, as the occasion required. I tell you he was a toy-tempest on the fight, a lilly-lipped hummer on the trail, and when it come to lyin', he could throw a hull Quaker meetin' into fits. Poor old Kit! poor old hero! poor old liar! I hope I'll meet him in the better world. I'd like to play a good trick on him. I owe him one, and when I last parted with him I promised I'd foller him to whichever place he went—up or down—and get even with him for a roarin' old joke he got on me. Ah! me! well, I s'pose I'll go some day, too. I'm 'bout to the end o' my journey."

There was a quaver in the old man's voice and a mist in his eyes that told of his sadness of heart. A silence ensued, during which all finished their breakfast and prepared to continue their journey. When ready to start, much to the hunters' surprise and regret, Rattler said:

"Boys, I'll have to leave you here. My course now lays in dif'rent d'rection from yourn. I hope you'll find your friend alive and well, and if we never meet ag'in on earth let us hope for the best on t'other side o' the Great Range. And be keerful that the red-rinds don't hull yer skulps off. They'll be hot as hornets when they find three o' their folks dead with squozen jugulars. Good-by, boys, good-by!"

"Good-by, Rattler," shouted the boys, as the old man departed with the nimbleness of youth.

"Well, well," exclaimed Boscobel as he stood watching the retreating form of the hunter; "the old man seems to have been struck by a sudden notion."

"Yes," responded Randall; "and, what's more, he seemed a little evasive when talking about our friend Damon. Surely he would have kept nothing from us."

"Boys," added Ajax, "it struck me with the force of a thunderbolt that Tom Rattler knew something of your friend Damon. I may have misjudged the old man—in fact, I could not believe he would do anything wrong, but I shall always believe that he knows a little something of the mystery that surrounds your friend Damon's fate."

The amateurs were greatly surprised by this declaration, and yet thought the young giant, as well as themselves, might be mistaken.

After the subject had been thoroughly discussed without coming to any solution, the party continued their journey southward, with no notion, however, of giving up the search for the missing man.

Ajax accompanied them to assist in the hunt for Damon. This was a valuable acquisition to the amateurs' force, and with the young giant's experience and skill as a mountaineer and trail-er they entertained a faint hope of success.

Reaching their base of supplies near the mouth of Elkhorn Canyon, the hunters at once moved back up the canyon and constructed a camp in a secluded spot a few miles from the spring where Damon had been shot. They called it Camp Seclusion.

From this point they made their movements every morning. At first they went out two and two, but in the course of a few days they divid-

ed up, each one taking his own course, or rather a certain course, all returning at night. In this way the search for Frank Damon was continued day in and day out without finding a single trace of him, and finally hope began to die out of the breasts of the three footsore, sad-hearted and weary young hunters.

CHAPTER III.

SABINA BANDY.

DOWN the sinuous course of Crazy Canyon which had its outlet into the Elkhorn, a woman, mounted upon a weary-eyed mule, rode at a leisurely pace. It was an unusual sight—a white woman traversing alone the solitude of such a dismal, dangerous pass whose rugged, overhanging walls in many places seemed ready to fall at the jar of a footfall or the brush of a wing.

The woman was well advanced in years. Her somewhat wrinkled and vinegarish face and small, bony hands were bronzed by wind and sun; but in her eyes there burned the fire of a hopeful, determined spirit. She wore a green calico dress, a faded summer shawl, and a flaring old sun-bonnet. In her lap lay an ancient umbrella, while at the right of her saddle she carried a gaunt leather bag in which was no doubt her personal effects.

The mule this woman rode was a slender, clean-limbed animal, though apparently a drowsy, spiritless creature.

Crazy Canyon was beset with manifold dangers, but of this the woman seemed aware, for she kept a close watch around her with as keen an eye as a hawk ever flashed on a tender dove.

Light and shadows alternated with each other in the almost crazy windings of the appropriately named canyon. At times the hoof-strokes of the iron-shod mule would ring out with a clear metallic sound, then with a dull, hollow thump, and out of these the mingling echoes created a strange medley of sounds.

On slowly, down the pass, rode the woman, both eye and ear on the alert.

Suddenly she was startled by a piercing shriek coming from down the defile. Drawing rein, she involuntarily exclaimed:

"Merciful gracious! what was that?"

She listened and again heard that cry of terror—the unmistakable cry of a female.

Turning her mule abruptly to the left she rode into a dense cluster of bushes that grew at the base of the cliffs, dismounted, hitched her animal, and then crept cautiously back to the edge of the thicket. Peering out into the canyon, she was startled to see a red-skin coming toward her, half-dragging and half-carrying a young girl.

At first the woman took the captive maid for an Indian. She was dressed in the peculiar and fancifully-wrought frock, beaded leggings and moccasins affected by the young Indian girls of royal blood; but, upon approaching nearer, she discovered that the captive was a beautiful white girl of seventeen or eighteen summers.

The sight of the great, half-naked savage dragging the terrified girl to a horrible fate, seemed to fire the breast of the old woman with a heroic determination, and, like a tigress, she bounded from her concealment and confronted the red-skin, a little derringer in her hand, her eyes flashing and her face rigid in its defiance.

"Stop right there, you onmerciful gal-thief!" she shrieked, wildly shaking her finger at the Indian.

The Sioux stopped short and dropped his hand to his tomahawk, his face the very picture of savage surprise. But quickly recovering his composure, he endeavored to express a lofty contempt for the presence and command of the old woman by ejaculating:

"Ugh! old squaw! shoo!"

"Yes, ole squaw!" retorted the woman, her eyes flashing; "but she's not afeard o' you, you nasty thief!"

With his left hand the Indian half-drew his tomahawk from his girdle, while with the right arm around the maiden's form he started on as if his way was not disputed, a disdainful leer upon his painted face.

But the fellow had reckoned without his host. He had scarcely taken three steps when up went the old woman's right arm, a puff of smoke burst from her hand, the short, sharp crack of a pistol rung out, and with a cry of agony the red-skin released his captive, staggered backward, then forward, in frantic efforts to keep his feet, but, losing his balance, he fell to the ground.

"There! What did I tell you, you nasty varmint!" exclaimed the old woman, in savage triumph, as she ran toward the girl; "I reckon

mebby he won't fool with another ole squaw—will he, little girl?"

The maiden, when released by the savage fell to the earth, but quickly springing to her feet she cast an affrighted look at the fallen Indian and then at her rescuer, as if unable to fully realize the change in the situation.

"Don't be scar't, little one," the woman went on, seeing the girl's confusion; "he's dead as a smoked herrin'. Come, tell me who you are, an' what ye'r' a-doin' here."

"My name is Leah," the girl answered, "and oh! I am so thankful to you for your brave deed! But there are other Indians down the pass! We must fly at once!"

"Yes, so there be," affirmed the woman as she caught sight of several red-skins coming up the defile. "Leah, can you ride on hossback?"

The girl looked at the woman as though she did not comprehend her meaning.

"Come, quick!" commanded the woman, taking the maiden by the arm and leading the way to where the mule was hitched. Untying the animal she bade the girl mount. Leah obeyed with the implicitness of one moved and directed by the very thoughts of another. But, as soon as she was in the saddle, she looked down at the old wayfarer and said:

"Am I not robbing you of your only means of safety?"

"No, child, no!" she replied, with an impatient stamp of the foot; "go at once! Let the critter run just as fast as you want to. I'll take care of myself—I'll dodge them varmints in the bushes—go!"

Turning the animal Leah rode out of the thicket and away up the pass at a lively pace.

The red-skins had heard the pistol-shot, and saw the flight of the girl; and when they came up and found the body of their friend, they thrilled Crazy Canyon with their demoniac yells.

So swiftly rode the beautiful Leah up the crooked, zigzag canyon, that it seemed reeling beneath and around her. It made her faint and dizzy, and when, at length, the yells of the Indians burst upon her ears, she drew rein.

A footstep sounded near. She glanced about her and beheld the gigantic figure of a white man approaching her. It was Ajax, the Infant Giant.

At sight of him the maiden's first impulse was to cry out with fear. Even the mule shrunk back as if in affright. But, the kindly look upon the Giant's face quickly assured the girl that she had nothing to fear. In fact, the expression of fear on her face gave way to one of recognition, and she said:

"Sir, you are Ajax, are you not?"

"Ah! you know me, then?" the Giant responded, politely touching his hat; "but, how is it so since we never met before?"

"I have heard of him and his deeds of daring," the girl responded; then, as the yells of the Indians broke anew upon her ears, mingled with the rapid popping of revolver-shots, she started up, crying out: "but, do you hear those yells and those shots, Ajax? A friend who rescued me from peril is back there and I fear in danger! And, Ajax, that friend is an old woman! Can you save her?—help her, Ajax?"

"I'll do my level best, miss," the gallant young mountaineer declared, and turning, he hastened away down the defile.

By this time the sound of conflict had ceased, but noises he heard convinced the young Hercules that the red-skins were still up to some mischief.

Keeping under cover of the bushes that fringed the base of the bluffs, Ajax soon came in sight of two Indians in the canyon who appeared to be on guard, while up two hundred feet on the almost perpendicular side of the hill, he discovered several more of the Sioux, engaged in rolling great stones down into the valley.

Satisfied that this work was for the purpose of crushing or dislodging an enemy, the hunter resolved to stop it if possible. He opened upon them with his repeater, and at every shot a savage went down out of sight. Almost simultaneous with his first shot, some unknown rifleman opened fire on the Indians from down the canyon, and thus exposed to two deadly rifles, the surprised and startled bucks beat a lively retreat, and soon all was quiet.

Then Ajax began cautiously advancing. Step by step he made his way toward the scene of the red-skins' mischief. He had nearly reached the bodies lying in the canyon when he caught sight of a man just beyond, and at once recognized him as Bob Boscobel.

In a moment the two were together.

"But," said Ajax, "we've salivated a few of

the varmints, but, how comes it you're here, boy?"

"Ajax, I have seen that Mysterious Girl, you told us about," Boscobel answered.

"And followed her, eh?"

"No, for I did not know which way she went after she disappeared like a vision from my sight. But I instinctively drifted this way, and when I heard a shot and Indian yells I made up my mind something was wrong and hurried up. What does all this mean any—"

"Hark! did you hear that groan?" interrupted Ajax.

"Yes, some one's in trouble—in pain."

The two turned to the base of the bluff whence the sound proceeded.

A pile of rock in a little depression or pocket in the hillside, and three or four dead Indians lying upon the pile was all that they could see; but, while they stood listening, they heard the sound of a human voice come from under the rock heap!

"Bob, there's some one buried under them stones, and it must be the woman who rescued the Mysterious Girl. These are the rocks them red devils rolled down here upon her. Come, we've work to do."

Laying aside their guns the two stalwart men set to work rolling away the stones. Some of them were huge boulders that required the united strength of the two men to move. They worked with a will—until the perspiration rolled from their flushed faces. The groans they heard no more, and every moment they expected to come upon the crushed and lifeless victim of the red-skins' barbarity.

Their work was well along when Bob suddenly paused and sniffing the air exclaimed:

"Ajax, what's that I smell?"

Ajax straightened up, dilated his nostrils like a buck endeavoring to locate the source of a suspicious scent, and then replied:

"It's for all the world like the smell of tobacco-smoke!"

"That's it, exactly," declared Boscobel, "but we've no time to investigate it now."

They resumed their work with renewed energy. Ajax, like a Trojan, indeed, lifted the boulders and tossed them aside as though they were pebbles. Rapidly the pocket was cleared. Their labor was nearly completed, when, suddenly, a startling and exasperating surprise met their gaze.

A few large stones had been removed, disclosing an opening in under a projecting ledge, and in that opening was quietly and composedly seated an old woman smoking a short-stemmed clay pipe as unconcernedly as though nothing unusual had been going on around her.

"Ghost of Solomon!" exclaimed Ajax.

"Sibyl of Perdition!" added Boscobel.

"What's the matter, gentlemen?" asked the old woman, a peculiar twinkle in her sharp gray eyes.

"Well, that beats me!" declared Bob, with unfeigned surprise.

"Gentlemen," exclaimed the woman, a little tartly, "are you disappointed beca'se you didn't find the mashed, broken and bleeding body o' the lawfully wedded, wrongfully deserted, heart-broken wife o' Christopher C. Bandy?"

"What, you the wife of Kit Bandy, the famous Mountain Detective?"

"Yes," replied the old woman, rising to her feet and making a neat little bow of mock courtesy. "I'm—the—wife—of—that—in-famous—old—scoundrel, Kit Bandy! And, what's more, I'm his betters, and've been since the hour he led me, a timid, blushin' damsel o' twenty-four to the hyenial alter. Yes, I'm Sabina Ellen Bandy!"

CHAPTER IV.

A SURPRISING MISSIVE.

AJAX and Boscobel were fairly dumfounded by Sabina Bandy's declarations, and her conduct. There was something of the ludicrous, as well as the serious, in the old woman's actions and talk that seemed altogether out of place there.

"Mrs. Bandy," Ajax finally mustered up courage to inquire, "what are you doing here in this lonely, dangerous mountain all alone and unprotected?"

"S'archin' for my recreant, rascally husband," was the prompt and emphatic reply.

"I'd have you know that I'm no spring pullet, nor cowardess, as the carcasses o' a few redimps out yander bears witness. I can hoe my row if I am a poor, deserted old woman, and I mean to trail Kit Bandy to his last repose but what I'll have revenge on him. He's a heartless flirt, but I'll see that no other timid, thoughtless girl is ever wooed—"

"But, my dear madam," interrupted Ajax, appearing as serious as was possible under the circumstances, "I'm afraid you'll never find your husband short of the grave."

"Why? what do you mean?" shrieked the woman, as if anticipating some direful news.

"Your husband is already in his grave."

"What? my Kit dead?" cried the woman.

"Yes," Ajax went on; "he was hung some time ago near Bowlder by the Bonnet-Monday outlaws."

"Oh, woe! woe is me!" wailed the sorrow-stricken Sabina, wringing her hands and weeping to and fro in real agony.

Ajax and Boscobel endeavored to comfort her, but she refused to be comforted. Then they offered to escort her to any place of safety to which she might desire to go, but this offer was kindly rejected; and finally she announced her intention of going in search of the maiden who had ridden her mule away, procure the animal and go, she knew not where, neither did she care.

"Mrs. Bandy," Boscobel asked, "do you know that maiden and where she lives?"

"Even if I did," the woman replied, "it would be better, perhaps, for the girl that I kept it secret. She is young, innocent and pretty, like I was once. You are infatuated, I know, young man. You might win her heart only to wreck it like Kit Bandy wrecked mine. Oh, deary me! if I could've only got my fingers on that man before the outlaws did, he'd 'a' thought hanging was a delicious way to die."

"Then it was revenge more than the presence of your husband you sought, I see," said Boscobel. "I'm afraid you didn't pull well together in the domestic harness."

"A sweeter disposition no angel ever possessed than I when we were first wed, young man. For a while we pulled together like a pair o' Cupids, but finally he began to hang back on the breechin', while I war strainin' the tugs o' wifely duty like a Norman filly. No, Christopher never would pull up, but like a balky steer loll back, and when I begun to prod him up, he r'ared up, threw hisself in the harness, then lunged off and fled my bed and board like A. Boodler for Canada. Gentlemen, I thank you for kindly rollin' them stuns away, though I'd got out if I'd had to scratch my way through solid rock. Good-by."

With this the old woman was gone, nor were Ajax and Boscobel in the least bit sorry.

"What do you think of that?" asked Bob, as the woman sailed away.

"A catamount in calico. Poor old Kit Bandy! what a blessed refuge the grave is to some people!" philosophized Ajax.

"Ajax, I tell you there's some mystery about that woman," declared Boscobel.

"So is there about that Mysterious Fairy," added Ajax.

"Yes, I'll admit that, Ajax, and now I want to tell you of my adventure to-day. About noon I stopped by a mountain spring to eat a cold lunch. I sat down by a high rock. Suddenly I was startled by a pebble falling near me. Fearing an enemy might be on the rock above me, I sprang to my feet, ran out from the rock and lifted my eyes to its summit. Instead of an Indian warrior I saw what I at first took for an Indian girl, but at a second glance I saw she was a white girl, and knew it must be the Mysterious Girl of whom you have been telling me. For several moments I stood, like a fool I know, gazing at her in astonishment, for she was all beauty and radiant loveliness. She stood on the very edge of the rock a hundred feet above me, her right arm outstretched as if she wanted to shake hands. Jee-whizz! wouldn't I like to have grasped that little hand in mine 'bout then! But I soon found out she didn't want to shake, for I saw something white drop from her hand and come flutterin' to the ground before me. I saw it was a folded paper and, stepping forward, I picked it up; then I walked back and again lifted my eyes to the top of the rock. But oh, destruction! that vision was gone, and nothin' but that bit of paper was left to convince me that I had not been dreaming. I grew almost sick at heart and, cursin' my ill-luck, I opened the paper and read—well, here's the paper; I'll read the astounding, as well as pleasing, information it gives, which is as follows:

"TO THE FRIENDS OF MR. FRANK DAMON:—Seek no further for Frank Damon, for you will find him not. But two weeks from this date, at the close of day, you will find him, if alive, at the spring in Elkhorn Canyon where he was wounded. If dead, information of the fact will be furnished at same time and place.

FRANK DAMON'S RE-SCUERS."

"Willows of Babylon!" exclaimed Ajax; "do you mean to tell me, Bob, that angel dropped that message to you?"

"I solemnly swear it."

"Then she's got Frank a prisoner," Ajax observed half-regretfully; "Lord John Rodgers! wouldn't I like to be in Frank's place! eh, Bob?"

"I see she already has your heart, Ajax."

"Well, to be honest with you, Bob, I saw that girl three months ago, and I've been loafin' round in these hills ever since tryin' to find where she lives. That's really what took me up to the Indian village—didn't know but she might be the darter of a renegade—and why I was so willing to stay with you three boys. To-day I met her, Bob, face to face, and conversed with her, but the cussed Ingins down here spoilt everything. She was on Mrs. Bandy's mule, and when the red-skins began yellin' the girl got excited and begged me to help her rescuer, the old woman. Of course I'd 'a' broke my neck if she'd told me to, so I had to leave her right there and rush off down here. It may be that she is up the canyon yet; at any rate, I'm going to see, and, if I find her, offer her my service as an escort home. I tell you no man, let alone a woman, is safe in these parts now. Ingins blood has been spilt quite freely and blood alone will atone for it. Will you go with me, Bob?"

"Certainly, Ajax, for I, too, am anxious about that girl's welfare on account of what she's done for Frank."

"Ha! ha!" laughed the Infant Giant, "I hope she's not a siren lurin' us to destruction. But, Bob, that note gives us to understand that wherever Damon is, he is seriously wounded, and there seems to be doubts of his recovery. However, if as promised, he is restored to his friends alive, he will be able to unravel the whole mystery surrounding that girl, and her presence here in this atrocious country. But come, Bob."

Taking up their rifles the young mountaineers started off up the canyon with hasty footsteps, yet with eye and ear on the alert for dangers that they knew now lurked in the shadows of Crazy Canyon.

CHAPTER V.

STARTLING INTRODUCTIONS.

AJAX and Boscobel followed up the canyon for two miles or more, but neither Mrs. Bandy nor "Frank's Rescuer" being found, they gave up the search, tacked about and started on their return to camp feeling pretty well rewarded for their day's work, even though somewhat disappointed.

When they reached Camp Seclusion they found Thorne and Randall already returned, and feeling quite blue and disappointed, although it wanted, at least, two hours of sunset.

The story that Ajax and Boscobel had to narrate revived the spirits of their friends, and while they were discussing the subject of how they could spend their time until Frank Damon was released, all were interrupted by the sound of approaching footsteps and immediately thereafter six white men entered camp unannounced, creating no little apprehension among the amateurs, for they were all strangers, and some of them decidedly suspicious-looking characters.

They were all dressed about alike with one exception. The man that was evidently their leader, wore black corduroy pants and vest, a black velvet coat, high-tipped boots and broad-brimmed hat. He was a man about fifty years of age, with a full, short-cropped black beard, dark eyes and a swarthy visage. At first sight his face made a favorable impression upon the amateurs, but a closer look, coupled with the insolence and familiarity of the entire party, reversed that impression.

All of them wore heavy spurs at their heels which was evidence of the fact that they had horses near. They were well armed, and were undoubtedly men well acquainted with the mountain and its dangers.

Ajax was unable to put an estimate upon the character of the men. He knew that one could not always tell by the outward appearance of men he met in the mountains what the man within was. In fact, he had been deceived both ways, and so in the case of the men before him he quickly decided to entertain them as friends and watch them closely as enemies.

"Hullo, here, gents!" exclaimed the man in black, as he stalked into camp with a bold familiarity calculated to disarm the amateurs of all suspicion at once; "pardon our intrusion, seeing such things are customary in the mountain camps."

"Oh, certainly, certainly," responded Ajax, in a tone of indifference that set his friends at ease; "our latch-string's always out to the wayfarer and weary."

"I suppose you are Ajax, the noted Infant Giant?" the man in black observed, with a look of curious admiration.

"That's what I'm called, stranger."

"My name is Captain David Hull," the man said; "and we're out on a ride through the mountains hoping to find some rich, fertile valley or park where we can locate a horse-ranch. I'm glad to meet you, Ajax, for you can give me some information. The topography of Montana ought to be pretty well known to you."

"Captain," said Ajax, "make yourself at home; but first let me introduce you to my friends. This gentleman"—turning to Boscobel—"is 'Truxillo' Bob, this one 'Revolver' Dick—the quickest man with a pistol on earth—and this one 'Daisy' Thorne—a daisy when it comes to fightin', or eatin', or—well, most anything that's swell—away up."

Captain Hull shook hands with each of the amateurs in a cold, informal way; then he sat down upon a boulder, rested his elbow on a large, flat-topped rock about five feet across, which had been doing service for the amateurs as a table.

Boscobel, Randall and Thorne were not a little surprised, as well as plagued, by the way in which Ajax introduced them. By this, however, they quickly perceived the young Giant's purpose—that he wished them to understand that he mistrusted Hull and his party, and had no conscientious scruples about the truth of what he told them.

"I presume," said Hull, "you folks are having a season of sport?"

"Yes, that's 'bout the size of it, captain," replied Ajax; "but I judge by your spurs that you folks are not monkeyin' around afoot like we are."

"No, we are mounted," Hull observed; "we went into camp about a mile below here, and seeing smoke this way we came to reconnoiter. We hear the Sioux are kicking up a great muss about the prospectors being in these hills which they claim as their territory."

"Yes, there are Ingins bent on mischief abroad in the hills," Ajax observed, but he said nothing of the trouble he and his friends had already had with them.

Ajax and Hull carried on a general conversation for some time, with an occasional observation from Boscobel and the others of each party.

Several minutes had thus been passed when a ripple of excitement was suddenly created by the appearance, without ceremony, of another stranger in their midst.

This last comer was a man of no less than sixty years of age, with a tall, slender, and rather angular figure, a long, full, snow-white beard and hair of the same hue that hung to his shoulders, the whole giving him a venerable and patriarchal appearance. His eyes were covered with green goggles. He was dressed in a loose-fitting suit of gray cotton jeans. A slouched hat pulled down to his eyes and ears covered his venerable head.

At either side he carried a canvas bag supported by straps passing over his shoulders, and in his hand he carried a long staff or alpenstock.

"Well, well!" exclaimed Captain Hull at sight of the old stranger; "that must be the patriarch of these hills! Ajax, you're having an influx of callers this evening."

"All friends are welcome," responded the Infant Giant, and advancing to the old man he said: "Father, whom have I the pleasure of welcoming to Camp Seclusion?"

"Joshua Macomber," replied the old man, extending his hand to the young giant, "and you must be Ajax, the Infant Giant?"

"I can't deny it, Father Macomber; my bulk gives me dead away," Ajax responded, a smile lighting up his face. "But, sir, you must be weary. Be seated, and accept the hospitality of our camp, such as it is. By the way, Father Joshua, these are my friends, and this Captain Hull and his friends who just called here. They're in camp further down the Crazy."

The old man bowed to the others, then seated himself with a weary sigh by the table-rock opposite Captain Hull.

"It strikes me, old friend," Hull remarked, "that you are beyond your depths—that is, you're in a dangerous country for one of your non-combative age."

"I am here in the interest of science," the old man replied; "I am a geologist, and am making a scientific investigation of the rocky forma-

tions of these hills under instructions from Washington."

"Then you are Professor Joshua Macomber," Ajax observed.

"That's as you please, Ajax," the old man answered; "but I am truly pleased to find a resting-place among friendly faces. I've had to make a long journey to get out of an unhealthy atmosphere."

"What are we to understand by 'unhealthy atmosphere?'" questioned Bob Boscobel.

"Oh, excuse me, sir," the professor apologized; "I had reference to the Indians. They seem to be getting mad."

"Professor," said Captain Hull, "I am something of a geologist myself, and if you have any rare specimens I'd be pleased to examine them."

"Certainly, certainly," exclaimed the professor, and he at once emptied the contents of one of his pouches on the rock in front of the captain. Among the half-dozen spawlds was the geologist's hammer, a quite unique and novel affair, that one would have considered more ornamental than useful. The old man replaced it in the pouch and dropped the latter in his lap.

Captain Hull examined the specimens in a way that was very evident that he knew little and cared less for such things. Finally he said:

"Professor, I should think a man of your apparent age would really be afraid to be roaming around here."

"Afraid of what?"

"Ingins and outlaws. As you have already intimated, the Ingins are making trouble, and you surely can't be ignorant of the fact that the Bonnet-Mondays are operating all over the territory."

The Bonnet-Mondays were an organized band of outlaws under the dual leadership of one Seth Bonnet and Bill Monday, two as cunning and desperate villains as ever went unhung. The Bonnet-Mondays, as the band was called, laid toll upon horse and cattle ranches, Express companies, and, in fact, upon every class of citizens whose stock or purse would yield them a revenue. They were confined to no particular district, but were ever on the move. To-day they were in one place and to-morrow heard of fifty miles away. Their headquarters were in the saddle, and this fact prevented the authorities from ever locating them, and baffled every attempt made to capture the gang; and so in time the Bonnet-Mondays had come to be a terror to the country.

In reply to Captain Hull's last remark, Macomber said:

"Well, captain, I'm troubling nobody, and if the Bonnet-Mondays think they can get blood out of a turnip let them get it; and as for Indians, I will try and keep out of their way."

"Look here, old man," said Hull, in a changed tone, fixing his eyes upon the professor, "isn't it possible that you are some kind of a spy or detective?"

The old man laughed softly in his beard, then, as if directing the query to all, he glanced around at the now eager faces turned toward him, and asked:

"Do I look like a mysterious man? a spy?"

"Well," returned Hull, "one can't always tell by appearances what a man is in this land. You may be a Bonnet-Monday, for all we know, playing geologist. We know they have out shrewd spies and scouts or they would never have succeeded in running down that sleuth-hound, Old Kit Bandy."

"Ah! indeed?" exclaimed the old professor, "then Kit Bandy was really killed by the Bonnet-Mondays?"

"Yes, hung higher than Gilderoy's kite."

"I can't believe it; I can't believe it!" declared the old man.

"It's true, professor," affirmed Ajax. "I saw him after he was dead, though I confess I never knew Bandy; but there were fifty men present who knew him well."

"Oh, Bandy's dead—deader'n Old Noah," declared Hull, in a tone of cruel glee; "but that doesn't concern us in the least. What does concern us is the true character of Prof. Macomber. It strikes my very forcibly that the professor is not what he professeth to be. Therefore, it will be in order to see what kind of eyes are behind them goggles, and whether that patriarchal beard and those venerable locks are growing in their natural soil or not."

"My dear captain," replied the old man, taking his geologist's unique hammer from his lap and nervously tapping the rock, across which he and the captain gazed into each other's eyes, "I will not submit without protest to the insult you propose, for insult I shall regard it."

"Ha!" Hull half sneered, "you'd defy all of us, then?"

"I will not be insulted without protest."

"Bender," said Hull, addressing one of his men, "you and Chetwing search that man, protest or no protest."

"Hold, captain!" interposed Ajax, "you seem to forget that old man is a guest in our camp."

"Young man, I forget nothing!" was the indignant reply, something of the man's hidden character beginning to crop out.

"We'll not permit you to abuse that old man; don't you forget that!" was Ajax's rejoinder.

"Ajax, you've a fine reputation for bulk," the captain retorted, in a sarcastic tone, "but that don't count when bullets are trumps."

"Ah! you even threaten then!" exclaimed the professor.

"I do not propose to be dictated to," answered Hull, laying his revolver on the rock before him: "we are free characters, and generally make our words law."

"Then," observed Macomber, "you are a kind of a legislature, supreme court and all in one, eh?"

"Old man, you'll rise, stand and be searched!" commanded Hull, nettled by the professor's sarcastic remarks.

Macomber never moved a muscle.

"Will you obey, sir?" again spoke up the captain; "must I tell you who I am in order to secure a quick compliance?"

"I should be pleased to know who you really are, captain," answered the old man; "introduce yourself."

"Sir, I am Seth Bonnet, the Outlaw!"

Instead of this revelation startling the professor, as the self-proclaimed outlaw had expected, he seized with his right hand the head of his hammer and with his left stripped the snowy beard from his face, then leaning forward glared into the villain's face saying:

"And I am Kit Bandy, the Mountain Detective!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE GALLANT AJAX TO THE RESCUE.

THE introduction of Seth Bonnet and Kit Bandy to each other was witnessed by Ajax and the amateur hunter in speechless amazement. Nor was the revelation of the old geologist any less startling to the outlaws.

To the latter the name of Kit Bandy had been a greater terror than that of the Bonnet-Mondays had been to those who had reason to fear them. But Seth Bonnet, believing that the original Kit Bandy had been hung by his band—that the man before him was an impostor—quickly recovered his composure and, with a contemptuous curl of the lip and disdainful frown, exclaimed:

"Old man, you are doubtless a spy, but you can't ring in the Bandy racket on Seth Bonnet. You have gone so far now that you can go further, and, for the last time, I command you to rise and throw up your hands, and my friends will see that there is no interference from these hunters."

As he concluded he cocked his revolver with which to enforce his order; but, as he did so, the old man thrust the handle of his hammer across the rock into the outlaw's face—there was a sharp report, a puff of smoke from the end of the hammer-handle, and Seth Bonnet fell dead, shot through the brain!

A cry burst from the spectators' lips as they shrunk back appalled. Never were men more startled. The geologist's hammer had proven to be a deadly firearm, and before the stricken outlaw's friends could realize that their leader had been shot, Kit Bandy, for he the old professor really was, assumed his true character and springing to his feet, he shouted:

"Into the varmints, boys, with a vengeance!"

And scarcely had he spoken before the pistol of Ajax rung out and the outlaw, Chetwing, fell in the act of avenging his leader's death.

This second shot seemed to fill the surviving outlaws with abject terror, for they took to their heels like deer, firing random and harmless shots back over their shoulders as they ran.

Ajax and Boscobel started in hot pursuit, but Old Kit called them back.

"Boys," the indomitable old man-hunter said, as they came up, "there's danger o' bein' ambushed in follerin' them varlets. There are Ingins more plentiful than outlaws abroad in these hills."

"Yes," replied Ajax, "we knew there were Ingins about, but never dreamed of Bonnet-Mondays until them fellers entered camp when

I mistrusted them at once. And so you are really Kit Bandy?"

"The only original Old Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy," the old man replied, his face beaming with an expression of mingled joy and excitement. "I know I was reported deader'n the mother o' Adam, but that was all a mistake, and that feller the outlaws hung near Bowlder a vile impostor. Ho! ho! ho! didn't I play the geologist on Mr. Bonnet in majestic style? Didn't that white beard and them patriarchal locks stack away up on druidical dignity? Didn't the great and robust Seth Bonnet fool hisself in mosaic style? He didn't know that hammer was loaded, did he? But, boys, by the twanging ram's horn o' Joshua! I'm dyin' glad to have sich a healthy-lookin' band o' kids fall into the company o' Kit Bandy. Yes, I'm Ka-ristopher Ko-lumbus Bandy, and here's my hand, and if I've anything you want, take it. And so this is Ajax, the Infant Giant! Horn o' Joshua! pretty nigh got yer growth, ain't ye, boy? Gosh! you're a whopper, 'Jax—must be frightfully cyclonish in a fight."

"I can do a little of that kind of work, I'll confess," Ajax responded, "but I don't claim to be the old destroyer that Kit Bandy is, and never expect to."

"Boy," said the old man with assumed gravity, "you don't know what you may come to. I was once a handsome, timid young man, and in my guileless innocence led Sabina Ellen Frisby to the altar, and from that day on I became a changed man, and—"

"Mr. Bandy," interrupted Bob Boscobel, "within the past four hours Ajax and I met your wife."

"What! met my wife?" exclaimed the old detective, with a start, "do you mean it, boys?"

"Verily, I do; she was in search of you, but Ajax told her that you were dead."

"Did she believe him?" with an eager look.

"She appeared to, though she didn't go into hysterics over the sad information."

"Then she didn't believe you, Ajax," the old man declared. "Boys, bring on your outlaws, your savages, your wildcats, grizzlies and cyclones, and I'll wrestle with them unto death; but deliver me from the fury of my wife Sabina. You may doubt it, boys, as she very likely played the injured-innocence on you, but she's a holy terror. And you may not believe me, boys, but the fact is I was once as handsome as an ambrosial lord; but now, alas! I am nothin' but a ruins o' Babylon, the destruction o' Herculaneum, the downfall o' the Roman Empire. You may think these scars are relics of encounters on the gory field of battle with savages and demons, but, if so, be at once undeceived. This hole here—this extinct volcanic crater on this classic head is where my wife Sabina planted the poll of a hatchet. This Himalaya range risin' over on this temple and arching across this majestic brow and sweeping down into this chaparral o' locks, is where Bina manipulated the edge of a skillet in cutting a rainbow—a bow of promise—to obey. This Suez Canawl across the bridge o' my nose she dug without the interference of any foreign power. Bless your innocent souls! boys, if I could spread out my epidermis like a blanket you'd swear it was a map o' Europe, so marked, and ridged, and spider-tracked is it—all done by that woman. And in view of all these solemn facts, do you blame me for fleein' to the more congenial atmosphere of outlaws, red-skins and grizzlies?"

"Well, no," replied Ajax, with a grim smile; "but of course there's always two sides to a story—especially where a husband and wife have the telling, and your wife tells as good a one as you."

"May the Ingins catch her 's all I've got to say, for she'll be wuss than the small-pox in their village," Bandy said. "But, boys, it's not safe for us to remain here. Them outlaws that escaped are not the only ones hereabouts. There were six or eight more in camp 'bout a mile from here; and besides, there's haydoogins o' Ingins in these hills bent on bloody butcher. My advice is to change camp to a more secluded place preparatory to work, for there is work to do."

"What kind of work?"

"Fightin'. I've been follerin' them outlaws all evening. There are two young and handsome girls with them, and one of those girls I know to be a captive."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Ajax; "but then, come to think, I have heard that Seth Bonnet had a daughter—as fair and lovely a girl as the sun ever shone upon, and that she always accompanied her wicked father on his rides."

"The poor thing!" sighed Bandy, with genuine sadness, as he glanced at the lifeless body of

the outlaw chief; "she has taken her last ride with him."

"If it be his girl," said Ajax, "she will doubtless be here to claim her dead, and for her sake I will carry the body to a secluded spot and cover it so that it may not be mutilated by wolves."

"A soft, kind heart in an iron chest," mused Bandy, aloud. "It's a good sign, boys. I have an old friend somewhar in the big, wild West that's a hull Bengal full o' tigers on a fight—can clip an Ingins' skulp off easier'n I can a c'upon off'n a ten thousand-dollar bond—knows no mercy when it comes to demolishing wickedness, but'll melt down when it comes to the sufferin' o' even a wounded bird; and a woman's tears! why, it just breaks him all up. He alers was moved by my Sabina's tears—so much so that I've hoped to hear he'd moved away with her to the black heart o' Africa. He isn't bigger'n a ten-year-old boy, but there war more spirit, more fight, more pluck, and more fun and frolic wrapped up in that little runt's skin than any critter this side o' his birthday. Horn o' Joshua! what would I give to see that little old thunder-gust, Tom Rattler?"

"Tom Rattler, the hunter?" queried Ajax.

"The very same—know him?"

"We were with him a few days ago up in the neighborhood of the Sioux village."

"Blessed news!" shouted the old mountain detective; "may the Lord protect him, and deliver him into my arms, the darlin', old, funny vagabond! But, boys, excuse me; time's precious."

The body of Seth Bonnet was laid in the bushes and covered over with a blanket.

All the weapons on the two dead bodies were appropriated by the party, the rude tents torn down, and, with their supplies of food and ammunition, removed a mile distant up the canyon, where, in a narrow cut well protected by bluffs, they again encamped.

Kit Bandy had joined fortunes with the hunters, and they now felt pretty secure against any immediate danger.

By this time it was quite dark. A fire had been lighted in a kind of a cave or hole in the bluff, and some venison broiled for their supper which had so long been delayed.

Finally Bandy announced his intention of going down and reconnoitering the outlaws' camp. He wished to fully satisfy himself as to whether the two girls seen with the freebooters were captives or not.

And Bandy had no sooner departed on his mission than Ajax was possessed of a desire to return to their late camp and see who, if any one, came for the body of Seth Bonnet. It was one of those strange, unaccountable fatalities that prompted him in this. His friends could see no advantage that could be gained by the knowledge he sought. Neither could he, but he went.

As he approached the scene of the outlaws' death, he saw a light floating about in the darkness.

Cautiously approaching nearer he saw a figure moving around with a flaring pine torch carried in its hand above its head.

"Great mercy!" exclaimed the young mountaineer to himself, "it is a woman—the outlaw's daughter!"

He saw the woman walking around, the torch held above her head, searching for the body of her father.

In evident despair she finally tossed the light into a heap of pine needles that the amateurs had used for a bed. Instantly a bright flame shot upward, lighting up the surrounding camp with the glare of a mid-day sun.

Ajax was concealed within twenty feet of the woman. He could see her plainly, and for a time he could scarcely believe the evidence of his own eyes.

He saw that she was a young girl of not more than eighteen—tall and graceful, with large, dark-blue eyes, long black hair, and a face peerless in its beauty, despite the expression of grief upon it.

Like one dazed Ajax stood and feasted his eyes upon her. He had never looked upon a fairer woman, and when he caught the light of a pure and innocent soul reflected in her tearful eyes, a pang of remorse smote his breast. He knew she was there searching for the body of her father, for whose sins she was in no way accountable; and so charmed was he by her presence—so deep his sympathy for her in her bereavement, that he would gladly have restored her dead to life had such a thing been within his power.

The maiden stood and gazed sorrowfully into the dancing, darting flame. Ajax could hear an

occasional sob. He could see her bosom heave with the grief within.

Why was she there alone? were the outlaws afraid to accompany her? Was she expecting some one? These were the questions that presented themselves to Ajax's mind, but before he could give them further thought, a soft step sounded near. A figure glided from the bushes. It was that of an atrocious-looking Indian warrior. He stopped, half-crouching, a few feet from the girl, his black, basilisk eyes fixed upon her with a burning, snakish glare, a smile, or rather a grimace, of sensuous admiration resting upon his devilish face.

The girl started slightly at sight of the wretch. The savage muttered something inaudible to Ajax, but which caused the maiden to shrink back, her face blanched with terror. Her lips parted in an attempt to cry out, but her tongue was paralyzed with fear.

Then as the panther leaps upon the timid fawn, the savage sprang at the girl and seizing her by the arm, started dragging her toward the shadows. But he had taken but a step or two when Ajax, his very soul enraged, bounded from his covert, seized the savage by the scalp-lock, lifted him from his feet and whirled him around and around—wringing his neck as though he were a fowl, and then with an oath, dashed him upon the earth—his neck broken—a quivering, lifeless mass!

CHAPTER VII.

A NOBLE, DARING DEED.

So suddenly had the red-skin come upon the unsuspecting, grief-stricken girl—so full of dreadful meaning was the look he gave her, so fiercely did he grasp her arm, and then, so sudden and so terrible the vengeance that fell upon him, that she could scarcely note the rapidly transpiring events, nor fully comprehend their dreadful meaning. And even when she stood free of the rude grasp of the savage, she fixed a wild, dazed look upon the young giant before her, her face ashen pale, her bloodless lips half-parted, her form transfixed.

Ajax saw that the beautiful creature was dumb with terror, and quickly sought to relieve her by kindly saying:

"You have nothing more to fear, miss."

The girl swallowed the lump that had been choking her. She drew a breath of relief. The color came slowly back to her face, the light of terror in her eyes faded out, and with an effort she succeeded in articulating the words:

"You are Ajax, the Giant Hunter?"

"I am, miss," in a kind, assuring tone, "and I mistrust you are the daughter of Seth Bonnet."

At mention of the outlaw's name the color again receded from the girl's face, and an expression of mingled grief and resentment flushed across her visage. In a tone not a little reproachful, she replied:

"Yes, I am Judith, the daughter of Seth Bonnet. You slew my father, and saved my life. Why have you done so, Ajax?"

"Miss Bonnet," the young mountaineer answered, "I cannot now explain to you the circumstances of your father's tragic death. You know the risks he ran. I saved your life because it was a life worth saving—the life of a pure, innocent girl!"

A changed look came over the face of the maiden. The tender, manly and outspoken words of the young mountaineer had reached her inner soul and softened the hard lines that had been so cruelly cutting into her heart.

"Ajax," she said, in a trembling, modulated tone, "I came here sworn to avenge the death of my father. I know you did not slay him, but that Kit Bandy did. Your brave deed, and kind, manly words have disarmed me and taken the nerve from my hand and the rage from my breast. Oh! what a fool a woman is!"

"Would to the Lord some men were troubled the same way," Ajax responded, with a faint smile, "and there would be less trouble in this wicked world. The body of your father I carried into the bushes yonder, and covered with a blanket and some boughs, that it might not be mutilated. This I did out of respect for you, who, Bandy informed me, was in camp below here."

"Oh, my poor father!" moaned the girl; "he was the only true friend I had on earth, though his followers have treated me with kindness and respect. I had hopes of reclaiming my father from his life of evil-doing. I have stayed by him day and night for years, all the while praying that God might turn him from his wicked life. He was so kind to me, granting my every wish and humoring my girlish whims—all but the one thing—quitting the life of an outlaw.

Oh! that death might come and relieve my breaking heart!"

"Miss Judith," said Ajax in a tender voice, "I have been told that the Lord never deserts those who trust in Him. You are young and innocent, and the world, full of good, kind people, is before you. Do not despair."

"But wherever I might go the brand, 'an outlaw's daughter,' would ever blaze upon my brow," she persisted.

"Miss, you're no more responsible for your father's sins than Heaven is for hell, and if I should ever hear any one make such a cruel charge I'd wring his neck as I did that brutal savage's. Go with me, Miss Bonnet, to my friends, and I promise your father shall have decent burial and you a safe escort from these hills."

"Ajax, I thank you with all my aching heart for your kind deeds and promises, but I cannot accept your offer. I believe you mean all you say, for I have heard of Ajax before, but I cannot become a guest in the camp of my father's slayer. Moreover, I desire to return to our camp. I have a mission there to perform this night in behalf of one in peril. Do not let me detain you longer, for your own life is in danger. The Bonnet-Mondays will never spare you, and some of them may be here soon. And if you will be so kind as to show me where my father's body lies, I will be forever grateful to you."

Taking up a blazing pine stick, Ajax made a torch and then conducting her to where the body lay, pulled aside its covering of boughs and blanket.

Judith gazed down into the silent, stony face. Then a cry that seemed wrung from her very heart burst from her lips, and falling upon the body she sobbed and moaned most piteously. She passed her hand over the clammy brow and stroked the dark hair falling back from the temples. She kissed the silent lips, and talked to him, pleading for a response. But oh! how cruel—how inexorable was death!

A prowling coyote suddenly uttered a gibbering cry in the darkness near. To the ears of the grief-stricken girl it sounded like a mocking laugh. She thought it came from Ajax's lips. Instantly her grief was stung to rage, and, snatching a dagger from her bosom, she sprang to her feet and turned upon the young giant, the very picture of a woman scorned.

She raised the weapon to plunge it to the heart of the man who, after his seeming kindness and professed sympathy, she believed had laughed at her grief; but as she did so, she saw, in the glare of the torch, tears coursing down the bronzed cheeks of the mountaineer, and at the same instant heard that hyena-laugh again in the valley below.

Instantly every nerve in her body seemed to relax. The fire in her eyes died out. The dagger fell from her trembling hand and dropping on her knees at the Giant's feet, she cried out in an imploring voice:

"Forgive me, Ajax! Oh, God! forgive me!"

"Certainly, certainly, gal," replied the man, himself not a little confused; "but you must go 'way from here or this'll kill you."

"Oh! how can I leave my dead father here alone in this black, lonely place?" she moaned, wringing her hands in sadness.

"Miss Bonnet," responded Ajax, his great heart moved to the deepest sympathy, "I will carry your father's body to your camp, since none of your friends come to help you."

"No, no, Ajax!" she cried, excitedly, "they would kill you on sight, for all you have done for me!"

"I fear them not," was the reply of the great-hearted and resolute fellow. "They dare not harm me in your presence!"

And before the girl could offer further protest the young Giant lifted the body in his strong arms and bore it away through the valley, the maiden walking at his side carrying the torch.

It was a long and laborious trip, even for the herculean strength of Ajax, but with only two or three stops he finally reached the outlaw camp, pushed boldly into the full glare of their camp-fire and in plain sight of all, laid his burden upon the earth. From Judith's lips he received her heartfelt thanks, which he acknowledged with a bow, then turned and departed into the night.

There were no less than a dozen outlaws present in camp. They were seated upon the ground eating supper, never dreaming that the hated Ajax would dare venture within their camp; and by the time they had fully realized that such was the case, he was gone again. In fact, it was the very boldness of the Giant's intrusion that made his daring deed a success.

One pugnacious old freebooter recovered from his surprise in time to fire a couple of shots in the direction Ajax had gone, and for this he received a scathing rebuke from Judith.

"Is't possible, Judith," the man asked, "that you, the darter o' Seth Bonnet, and the Idyl o' the Bonnet-Mondays, is the friend o' our wu'st enemy, Big Ajax?"

"Ajax befriended me," retorted the girl; "he rescued me from the power and cruelty of one of your friends, a Sioux warrior. He went alone where none of you dared to go through fear. He carried my father's body here that I might guard it from the wolves until given burial. Ajax may be a relentless foe to the red-skin and his friends, the outlaws, but he is justly kind and generous to the weak. Not one of you would accompany me to where my father's body lay. Ajax came fearlessly into your very camp to bring my dead. What a contrast between his conduct toward me and yours toward yonder poor, weeping girl!"

As she concluded she waved her hand toward a rude tent at the opposite side of the camp in which sat a young girl, her head bowed in grief. She was a captive there.

"I hope," observed the outlaw, "that you did not promise Ajax that you'd liberate that gal in consideration o' his sarvice."

"I promised nothing," Judith answered, turning away.

But the presence of the captive girl had not escaped the eagle eyes of the Infant Giant. At a glance he had taken in the entire place, noting everything, and as soon as he had reached the darkness, after parting with Judith, he turned back to where he could command a view of the outlaws' camp, count their numbers and note the lay of the grounds.

This he soon did, and was congratulating himself on the ease with which he thought he and his friends could surprise and vanquish the foe when, to his surprise and disappointment, he saw no less than twenty Indians, all in war-paint—enter the camp where they were warmly welcomed by the Bonnet-Mondays.

CHAPTER VIII.

KIT BANDY INTERVIEWS A PRISONER.

On leaving his young friends in the cut Kit Bandy hastened away toward the outlaw camp where, under cover of darkness, he soon arrived. Taking a position east of the camp he watched the enemy. He saw them passing to and fro, some of them preparing supper, and others making arrangements for their safety and comfort during the night.

If any one was on guard the old detective did not know where he was stationed, and made up his mind that the enemy was trusting wholly to his superior numbers as a safeguard against danger.

Half an hour had been thus passed in watching when he was startled by the appearance of Ajax, the Infant Giant, within the outlaw camp, bearing in his arms a lifeless form, while at his side walked a beautiful girl carrying a torch.

"What in the name o' mystery does the big lout mean?" the old man mentally ejaculated. "Has he gone over to the freebooters? or has that gal captered him? By the horn o' Joshua! they'll pepper him too full o' holes to hold shucks—by gracious! he's a terror! That's a leetle bit the boldest, impudentest capers I ever see'd in my eventful life!"

The last observation was occasioned by seeing the Giant lay the body on the earth, turn and walk slowly off into the darkness as though he had done nothing unusual.

Five minutes later a score of Sioux Indians appeared in the camp, where they were royally received.

Taking advantage of the confusion consequent upon the arrival of the war-party, Bandy crept forward through brambles and bushes, noiseless as a serpent, and finally gained a position in the shadow of the tent in which he supposed a captive was confined. As the tent stood back against a fringe of bushes he lay within the deepest gloom, having no fears of detection unless a foe should stumble over his prostrate form.

The tent had been erected of poles and blankets, and was therefore a loose-constructed affair. By pulling aside the edge of a blanket the old detective-scout could see inside, the opposite end being open and the light from the camp-fire shining in upon the bowed and sorrowing captive.

To let his presence be known to the girl without creating any excitement was what now interested Bandy most. He was within four feet

of her, it was true; but the outlaw's daughter, Judith, had come and seated herself in the entrance of the tent, just beyond the captive.

Rather than run any risks he resolved to bide his time, and with eye and ear on the alert he took in all that came within range of these organs.

Most of the outlaws were still at supper when the Indians arrived, and the red-skins being invited to partake, the meal was prolonged to an unusual length.

Presently an Indian chief came to the tent and looked in upon the shrinking captive with snakish, burning eyes. Old Kit's fingers fairly tingled to put a bullet squarely between his eyes, and he made up his mind to do so should the villainous-looking wretch lay a finger upon the girl.

However, the chief turned and walked off to where Judith, the outlaw's daughter, was standing giving some directions regarding her father's burial. He laid his hand upon her shoulder and looked into her face with a leering grin. Quick as a flash the brave girl resented the familiarity by giving him a violent slap in the face that caused him to stagger backward with an involuntary cry of pain.

Those that witnessed the chief's discomfiture burst into a coarse laugh.

Judith turned upon them with a look of scorn, and in a reproachful voice said:

"Shame upon you! now that my father is dead, you would see me insulted!"

"Bully for the brave little robberess!" thought Old Kit.

"Ugh!" ejaculated the rebuked chief, "white squaw kick!—make Pony-Head heap rattlin' wife—Pony-Head like wild-deer squaw—make heap fun—then git tame."

Pony-Head was a notoriously mean Indian chief—quarrelsome and unruly, making a great deal of trouble for his tribe as well as the Government. His followers were made up of outlaw warriors of the various North-western tribes, and being perfectly familiar with every defile and recess in the mountain, it had been utterly impossible to dislodge them.

As soon as the chief learned of the death of Seth Bonnet he took upon himself an authority over the camp. In this the outlaws indulged his savage vanity in order to retain good-fellowship with them. But, finally, when Pony-Head concluded that he must have one of the two girls, Bandy saw that a rupture was imminent between the vultures.

The result was a consultation. The two parties seated themselves in a circle around the fire, and for fully an hour white man's word and red-skin's cunning were pitted against each other. The whites were disposed to be conservative, but Pony-Head was insolent and domineering. He could readily see that the outlaws were without unanimity of opinions since their leader's death, and having a superior force he was not disposed to yield a single point. Hot words, at times, passed between them, and once they were on the eve of a conflict; but the outlaws finally yielded, and the fair captive in the tent was given into the possession of Pony-Head.

In the mean time, Kit Bandy had not been idle. He had succeeded in making his presence known to the prisoner. He learned that her name was Edith Dustan, that her home was in Cinnabar, and that while on her way to visit a friend a mile or so from town, she was captured by two outlaws and carried off.

"Miss Dustan," Kit said, in a low whisper, after she had finished her brief story, "in an hour or so I'll be back here prepared to help you to escape. The Injins and outlaws are 'bout to git into a quarrel, and if they could only git into a fight, then we'd have a glorious chance to elope. D'ye think ye'll have nerve to git away?"

"Oh, indeed, sir!" replied the girl, "I could do anything to get away from here!"

"Then be ready," commanded Kit, "and when you hear three light taps on the tent you may know I'm ready for you to go. Throw a blanket over your head and shoulders to protect them from the thorns and briars through which you'll have to crawl several rods after leavin' the tent. I'll have help near so that the attention o' the foe can be diverted should they press us too hard. Now mind—in an hour—three gentle taps."

"I'll be on the watch," replied Edith.

The old detective crept away, and hope grew strong in the maiden's breast. She prepared herself for flight. The outlaws and Indians were still wrangling; but suddenly it ended, and the loathsome Pony Head came and looked in upon her with a fiendish smile of admiration.

Her heart almost ceased to beat. She knew by the Indian's actions the result of the conference. But he made no attempt to enter the lodge. He threw his blanket nauseating with the fumes of tobacco-smoke, down by her side, then turned and joined his warriors.

"Oh, my God!" thought the girl, "he'll soon return, for he has left his blanket! What will—"

Her train of fearful thoughts was at this instant broken by a tapping on the back end of the tent. She glanced out toward the camp-fire to see that no one was looking that way, and, finding the moment a favorable one, she drew back the blanket at the end of the tent and whispered:

"I am ready."

"Come, then," responded the unseen friend, "and for your sake and mine, be as cautious as you can. One misstep, or the snap of a twig, and hope for you will be at an end forever."

CHAPTER IX.

OLD BANDY VICTIMIZED.

ON leaving the outlaw camp after his first interview with Edith Dustan, Kit Bandy hastened back to his friends and informed them of the result of his reconnaissance. In an instant all were ready to go with him to the girl's rescue, but he wanted only the help of Ajax. He thought the maiden's release could better be affected by strategy than by force, and thereby risk no lives.

To all this appeared the most feasible, and so he and Ajax started again for the outlaw camp.

At a point about fifty yards from their destination, Kit left Ajax to await his return.

On his hands and knees the old scout made his way back to the rear of the captive's tent, and in response to his signal the captive, wrapped head and shoulders in Pony-Head's gaudy and "loud"-smelling blanket, glided from the tent and stood at his side.

Whispering words of caution to her the old man led the way through the dense darkness of the thicket. They crawled on their hands and knees for several rods, then rising to their feet they moved faster.

They soon came to where Ajax was in waiting in the deep blackness of a clump of trees.

"Safe! safe!" whispered Bandy.

The words seemed to have wrought sensibly upon the captive's overburdened mind, and with a faint cry she fell to the earth.

"The poor, dear thing," said Bandy sympathetically, "she has borne the strain until overtaxed nature has given way, sought relief and rest in unconsciousness. She's fainted. But, Ajax, she's an angel o' beauty—a little fairy that'll only be a feather—Heavens! listen to them savages! they have discovered the gal's escape. Ajax, we've no time to lose!"

"Then here goes," said the big mountaineer, and lifting the inanimate and blanketed form in his arms he bore her away up the canyon at a pace that taxed the old man's speed to keep up.

By relieving each other at intervals the distance back to camp was soon traversed.

Bandy was carrying the limp form when they reached their friends, who hailed their return with a shout of joy.

Panting like a worried ox, Kit laid his burden tenderly upon the ground near the fire, saying:

"Boys, we rescued the little angel, but she's in a dead swoon, poor child!"

"Nary swoon!" came a gruff voice from the folds of the blanket; then a pair of arms were flung outward and the supposed maiden rose to a sitting posture; but, instead of the fair, sweet face of Edith Dustan, Kit Bandy beheld the sharp, weazen visage of a little old man!

"Horn o' Joshua! Blood and perdition!" burst from the lips of the astounded old detective: "it's not the gal, but that miserable, contemptible fraud o' God's green earth, Old Tom Rattler!"

CHAPTER X.

SABINA MEETS HER HUSBAND.

AJAX and his friends were amazed. A peal of rollicking laughter burst from the lips of Tom Rattler.

With a serio-comical expression upon his face, Kit Bandy stood gazing, first at his friends and then at the little old man on the ground, as if unable to realize the truth of the situation.

Tom Rattler was the first to speak after a full minute's silence.

"Yes, Kistsie, it are old Tom Rattler, the Red River Epidemic, and spiral thundergust, that you carried so tenderly into this camp, you old

Adonis. A sweet young thing—light as a feather—whew!"

"Tom Rattler, your days are numbered," declared Old Kit; "stand up, and if you've anything to say why I shouldn't slaughter you, let her warble. No man on earth dare serve me such a blood-thirsty, miserable trick and live!"

Old Rattler rose to his feet his face still aglow with silent laughter. Bandy made a lunge at him and throwing his long arms about the old man's neck, continued his harangue in tones of joy.

"God bless you, Tom!" he cried, "I'm delighted to see you, you base, abominable old cuckoo. Rat, it's a good one, but I'll git even with you if I have to foller ye to dingnation an' back. Shake, old pard; you're lookin' well—still handsome as an ant-eater, and plump as an Apache spear-handle, and—"

"Say, Kistsie," interrupted Tom, "take a rest and let me have a show. I want to observe that I'm rejoiced to clap my eyes on your classic face and majestic form once more. You're lookin' charmin', old pard—not a day older'n a hundred years ago; the same old lily-lipped hummer, the same old fool 'bout a pretty girl, the same ancient and tempestuous liar. Oh, by the great Rosycrusians! Kistsie, you're a sublime old buccaneer!"

"Ejectics aside, Tom, do you know," Bandy asked, "what became o' that little gal that you substituted your miserable old carcass for, in that tent?"

"I know, please the merciful Father!" came a shrill, sharp voice from the shadows of the defile, and Sabina Bandy, accompanied by Edith Dustan, entered the camp.

"Oh, horn o' Joshua!" groaned Old Kit, in evident despair, "'tis she—my wife, Sabina!"

"Yes!" fairly screamed the old woman, flying across the ground and confronting her recreant lord with upraised umbrella, "and I have thwarted your designs upon the innocent heart of that poor girl. You ungrateful man! you base deceiver! How dare you make love to that gal when you have a lawful wedded wife? Kit Bandy, you're a monster! the destroyer o' female happiness! But your career as a masher has ended. I'll take charge o' you henceforth hereafter!"

To those who did not understand the true relation existing between the untappy couple, Kit Bandy was placed in an unenviable and humiliating position.

Ajax readily forgave Old Rattler for the trick he had played on him and Bandy, and joined the old hunter in his laughter at the expense of the Detective Scout.

Old Tom explained how he was enabled to trick Bandy so cleverly. At the very time of Kit's interview with Edith in her prison-tent, Rattler lay in the bushes within three feet of the detective, whose presence he recognized. In fact, Rattler was there before him, and heard Kit's plans for Edith's escape; and as soon as an opportunity was offered, carried them out, escaped with the girl, whom he turned over to Sabina as soon as he had reached her. He then went back to the rear of the tent to warn Bandy of what he had done, and not until half a minute before he carried it into effect did he conceive the idea of playing a joke on Bandy—a joke that might have proved a serious affair to the fun-loving old hunter.

While Bandy, Sabina and Rattler were wrangling, Ajax held a conversation with Edith Dustan, from whom he learned all the particulars of her abduction.

Finally Tom Rattler said to Bandy:

"Pard, do you know the woods are full o' red-skins and outlaws?"

"I certainly do, Tommy," replied Kit. "Thar's a chance for a big, old-fashioned, thundergustian fight such as we've had many times together. Hark! you can hear the red varmints yellin' now! Don't they chin it off lustily? They're mad 'bout the gal—"

"That you toted off, Kistsie," interposed Rattler, "but, pard, a strong guard should now be posted, and a careful watch kept over camp the night through."

"I, for one, intend to take a posish down the canyon," said Bandy, "and if any Ingins come this way know it before they're right on us."

"And I for another," exclaimed old Sabina, "will take a posish right at your side, Karistopher Bandy. You don't escape from me, please the merciful Master, and I want you to know that, too."

With Sabina clinging to his arm, Bandy departed into the shadows of the canyon.

"Well," declared Ajax, "that's one of the couples we read about."

"That old fool woman'll be the means of getting Bandy killed," Dick Randall growled, greatly displeased with Sabina's conduct.

Rattler indulged in a low, chuckling laugh.

Out in the woods beyond hearing of any one, Bandy and Sabina stopped, when the old hunter asked:

"Well, Ichabod, how is things?"

"Feverish," responded the other; "the Mysterious Girl fell into red-skin hands to-day. Popped the red over and sent her away. Ajax met her. She sent him to my aid. The reds'd corraled me—winged a few of them and then took refuge in a hole in the side of the mountain. Reds buried me under rocks—Ajax and pard dug me out. I started in search of my mule—found it—card of thanks tacked to the saddle by the gal. Never got another dinged glimpse of her. Queer! queer!"

"Rather," added Old Kit, "but then we're makin' progress, and if we live long enough we may find that Mysterious Girl's hidin'-place. Her description answers that o' Bertha Fielding to a dot, and, of course, if it are her, then Howard Fielding is not far away. But I never got hold o' sich a puzzlin' job in all my life before. To be sure, the Ingins bein' after us all the time makes it wusser, but the Government's goin' to send troopers in here right off and clean the hills o' red-skins and outlaws. Moreover, we'll have the help o' Ajax and them three hunters for a while, at least. It's now certain that their missing friend is in custody o' that Mysterious Feminine, and as she's promised, in a note to Bob Boscobel, that Damon 'll be turned loose in two or three weeks, at a certain point, we may be able to find the lair o' our man through him."

Thus the two conversed for several minutes.

Meanwhile everything at camp was made as comfortable and safe as possible for Edith Dusan. A tent had been constructed of poles and blankets in a well-guarded spot. Bob Boscobel and Dick Randall stood guard. The fire was put out.

As soon as all at camp had been put in shape, Tom Rattler took leave of the amateurs, and went down the canyon to reconnoiter, so he said.

During the evening, Ajax was unusually thoughtful and quiet. Since his meeting with the outlaw's daughter, a spell had come over his spirit. All could see the change despite his efforts to appear natural. He conversed with Edith regarding her, and learned that she was a kind, Christian girl in spite of the fact that she was the daughter of Seth Bonnet.

The hours wore on toward midnight. All was quiet in camp. Bandy and Sabina had not returned—neither had Rattler. Their absence created some uneasiness.

Suddenly the crack of a rifle and a wild death-shriek broke the stillness of the night. Ajax, who lay resting on the ground, sprung to his feet, his spirit aroused.

A few minutes later, Kit Bandy came flying into camp in no little excitement.

"Look sharp, friends, the red varmints are on the move!"

"Where's Mrs. Bandy, Kit?" asked Edith, who had been awakened from her sleep by the report of the gun.

"In the woods somewhere," replied the old detective; "the Ingins fired into our fambly circle and scattered us in every direction; but don't worry, little gal; Sabina'll turn up in due time like a daffodil or a meek-eyed daisy. But, boys, remember the gal's life is in your keepin'; I'm goin' back into the canyon to look for 'Bina. If you need me, I'll not be fur away."

Again the restless old man departed into the canyon. He had been gone but a few minutes when the crack of a revolver and savage yells announced that a fight was going on somewhere in the defile below.

"By the willows o' Babylon!" exclaimed Ajax, "Bandy and Rattler has got into a fight at last and I'm goin' to have a hand in it! Boys, look sharp!"

And without another word the young giant lunged off into the darkness, guided in his course by the sound of the conflict. But he had gone but a short distance when the din of battle ceased, and he stopped to listen.

Off down the canyon he could hear excited voices receding in the direction of the outlaw camp, and he hurried forward to learn the cause. Soon he came in sight of the enemies' camp, where a great commotion prevailed among the robbers and their savage allies.

Creeping closer, the young giant was almost horrified to see a dozen of the foe emerge from the darkness, dragging into the light the half-lifeless form of Old Kit Bandy!

CHAPTER XI.

SABINA IN THE OUTLAW CAMP.

As he watched the merciless foe dragging Bandy into camp, Ajax could scarcely restrain himself from rushing in upon them. But a second thought told him that such a movement would be futile against such odds, and doubtless cost him and Bandy both their lives.

He saw the enemy were so enraged that they would likely make short work of the old man's life; but when they threw him upon the earth and bound him hand and foot, the young Giant knew that he was doomed to undergo Indian torture.

As the detective lay helpless upon the earth, his captors kicked him, walked over him, and otherwise abused him, but without eliciting the least evidence of pain. Ajax knew that the old man could stand this treatment but a short time; but what could he do toward helping him?

While the young mountaineer was trying to evolve from his fertile brain some plan for Kit's rescue, his attention was attracted by a lithe figure whisking past him in the dark. At first he thought it was an Indian scout, but catching a glimpse of it between him and the camp-fire, he discovered it was clad in female apparel.

He knew it was not Judith Bonnet, for he could see that person in camp. Was it Sabina Bandy? The thought had no sooner occurred to him than he resolved to test it.

"Whist, there!" he exclaimed.

Instantly the figure dropped down and remained silent as the grave. A minute or more passed.

"Whist, there!" again challenged the Infant Giant.

Still no answer.

"Say, I'm Ajax; who are you?" for the third time.

"Sabina Bandy," came the answer, and the figure stirred.

The next moment the Giant and the old woman were together.

Without any preliminaries Ajax said:

"Your husband's in danger, Mrs. Bandy."

"Yes, and they'll kill him, sure pop, unless he's released," was the answer he received.

"But," said Ajax, "what can we do in the face of such odds?"

"I'm goin' straight as a gouge right into that hornets nest and raise the very Old Harry."

"Woman, they'll kill you!" exclaimed the Infant Giant.

"Say, Ajax," said Sabina, in a changed and confidential tone, grasping the young mountaineer by the arm, "I'm no more a woman than you; I'm a man! Ichabod Flea is my name—I am the pardner o' Kit Bandy. We've been playin' this dodge for years, and it works like a charm. I've saved Kit Bandy scores o' times, and b'lieve I can do it again. He's always in trouble—everlastin'ly. Yes, Ajax, I'm goin' into that camp. Keep your eyes peeled, and if you don't hear somethin' bu'st, and see some wall-eyed fun, put me down for a fraud. If you see a chance to slip in and tote Bandy off, do so. Now look out. The band's goin' to play."

Ajax was so astounded by the revelations of the supposed old woman that before he could add a word the little old fellow had vanished from his side.

"Willows o' Babylon!" the hunter mentally ejaculated, "if that don't beat all my time! If that fellow can't play the old woman and wronged wife to perfection, who can? And such an odd, outlandish idea! I never—"

His musings were here cut short by a shriek from the outlaw camp, followed by a confusion of voices.

The cause was quite apparent. With a wild, hysterical shriek Sabina Bandy had appeared in camp, and, lunging into the midst of Bandy's captors, began belaboring them most soundly with both tongue and umbrella.

"Vile murderers! hissin' dragons!" she fairly screamed, "release my husband, or I'll haunt you! kill you! curse you! He's my only friend and protector! would you rob a poor old woman of her heart? You shall not!—never! never!" and she made a dash, reached the side of the prostrate Bandy and began untying his bonds.

Pony-Head pushed her away and the next moment she was surrounded by a hooting, jeering mob of red-skins and Bonnet-Mondays.

"By jolly!" exclaimed one of the latter, "that's a whole grand picnic! she's all grit—game as a hen pheasant, isn't she? She warps and sloshes around like a wild cat with a broken back, don't she? Isn't she a pretty old pony?"

"The idea," added a confederate, with evident

disgust, "of an old rattle-brained woman snort in 'round here's outrageous."

"So she's the wife of Kit Bandy," observed a third.

"Yes," exclaimed Sabina, who had overheard the remark, "I'm the lawfully-wedded wife of Kit Bandy, please gracious, and kill him if you dare and devils will attend your sleep till you die, and skeletons and ghosts grin and chatter in your faces day and night."

"You may be a witch, old gal," said one of the outlaws, "but Bandy must die. He killed Seth Bonnet, and our motto is eye for eye and tooth for tooth. When you're a widow you can pick out o' our number the best man in the band."

"Shame! shame! you filthy, red-necked vulture!" sneered the old woman, scornfully; "there's not another gang on earth but what's got some respect for a poor old woman. I see a beautiful lady over yonder; I'll appeal to her."

She started toward Judith Bonnet, who was seated alone in front of a tent, her head bowed in grief. In mock politeness the outlaws and red-skins fell back to let her pass.

Judith received her coldly, saying:

"You come asking mercy for your husband—he who killed my father, Seth Bonnet."

"But, my dear, fair lady," persisted Sabina, "you know my husband and your pa were at war with each other. They were natural enemies and his death 'ar the result. But if you'll release my husband I'll flee to Africa with him."

"I have no power to save your husband, even if I so desired," the girl answered. "My own sorrows are all I can bear, and your appeal must be to the men."

"Lord Almighty, gal!" the woman exclaimed, "the dove'd as well appeal to the hungry hawk for mercy!"

"All rests with them, Mrs. Bandy, so I bid you good-night, with my woman's sympathy and best wishes for you. If I could have my way your mission here would be a success. Again, good-night."

She walked to the tent in which the body of her father was laid out, and watching her until she had entered it, Sabina then turned and walked slowly toward the camp-fire in an apparently sad frame of mind.

Quickly was she surrounded again by the savages, who jeered her, mocked her, pinched her arms and otherwise insulted and abused her.

An outlaw, vieing with the red-skins in rudeness, attempted to kiss her, but quicker than a flash she slapped him in the face so violently that the blood fairly gushed from his nose. A yell of derisive laughter burst from the lips of the spectators.

Kit Bandy lay prone upon the earth, silent in his pain. He was almost wholly neglected for the time being. His wife was the center of attraction. The hardened villains that made the night boisterous with their coarse laughter and brutal jests continued to torment her as though she had been nothing but a wild beast. Her tears and entreaties, done with splendid tragical effect, were alike received with fiendish derision and cruel mockery.

The ring that had been formed around the old woman included within its circle the camp-fire also. This enabled the allies to see the woman's performances.

Sabina paced to and fro, at times weeping and begging, then railing and threatening. In the fitful glow of the camp-fire the circle of snakish eyes and wolfish faces turned upon her were enough to have appalled a braver heart. But she withstood the ordeal unflinchingly, continuing her walk to and fro, her hands clasped before her.

Finally she approached the fire and then, as if she had suddenly caught sight of some horrible vision in the flame, started back, throwing up her hands as if to ward off an impending blow. She ran backward until the line of savages behind her had been reached when her right hand swept forward, a small, dark object flew from her fingers, curved through the air and fell in the fire. At the same instant Sabina fell forward upon her face upon the earth. Simultaneous with this strange act there came a blinding flash, as if of lightning, accompanied by a thunderous crash that fairly rocked the old mountains. A volcano seemed to have burst from the camp-fire. Fire, ashes and stones were shot into the air, and savages and outlaws were violently hurled in every direction. Then over all settled a blinding darkness from out the depths of which rose the cries of the wounded and terrified victims that the echoes repeated in gleeful mockery.

CHAPTER XII.

BILL MONDAY PUTS IN HIS APPEARANCE.

AJAX stood appalled. He had been a witness to Old Sabina's entire performance from first to last, being not over five rods away. He knew not what the climax was to be until it came in the great explosion that even stirred the bushes, and twisted the boughs of the trees above him. He was half-stunned by the concussion, and stood like one dazed, gazing around him in the abysmal gloom that succeeded the rain of fire and ashes.

Well had Old Sabina kept her word, but what means she had used to do so, Ajax could not understand; nor did he attempt a mental solution of the mystery. The cries of distress that reached his ears at once reminded him that his time to act had come.

He knew not what the fate of Kit Bandy had been, nor the fate of Sabina; but guided by a recollection of Kit's position at the time of the explosion, he made his way into camp and groped along in the very midst of the moaning, howling throng of terrified outlaws and red-skins—now stumbling over a writhing figure, then brushing against another. With him all was guesswork, for the gloom was impenetrable by the eye, but he finally began to feel about him for Bandy. In doing so his hands came in contact with the skirts of a dress, and it struck him at once it was Old Sabina's.

"Sabina," he said in a low tone.

He felt a hand touch him, then came the response:

"Is't you, Ajax?"

"Yes," was the reply.

"Come; I have cut Kit's bonds."

The giant felt a hand draw him aside. He laid his own hand upon the arm of the unseen and followed out into the woods. Eight or ten rods from the camp his silent guidestopped, and a voice said:

"Here we are." It was the voice of Sabina, or rather Ichabod Flea. Ajax's heart gave a great bound of joy.

"Is Bandy safe?" asked the big mountaineer.

"Right here," came the answer from Bandy's own lips.

"Good!" ejaculated Ajax; "shake, Kit—are you hurt?"

"Got a Chinese pagoda over one eye, whole carcass kicked and pounded into a jelly, a few leaks in my anatomy—that's all. Oh! I'm all right, 'Jax," was Bandy's characteristic reply.

"Well, it was a narrow escape, that's sure."

"Yes, but the fertile brain o' my wife, Sabina—"

"Say, Kit," the young Giant interrupted; "I understand who Sabina is—Ichabod Flea, your pardner, who follows along after you to get you out of trouble. I must say the idea is as original as the characters engaged. Ichabod whoops up the wronged-wife dodge in seraphic style. But, say, what produced that explosion?"

"A neat little infernal machine that Sabina usually carries for such emergencies. Horn o' Joshua! how the thing did scatter fire, ashes and dirt! Oh, how I would like to 'a' turned the light on them red and white varlets 'bout one second after the thing went off. I'll bet some o' them war splattered all over the canyon. They'll find a few missin' men in the morning when they count noses. If they'll look around them they'll be apt to see an arm or leg hangin' in a tree, and here a kidney, and there a lung basted onto a rock. But I do hope that pretty gal, Bonnet's darter, will be spared the sight."

"Are you sure she was not injured by the explosion, Ichabod?" questioned Ajax.

"Don't think she was any more than frightened. I prolonged my *coup* until she was at a good safe distance from the fire. I'll never forgive myself if she was killed, or even hurt. I don't wonder at you being interested in her, Ajax. She's a screamin' lovely girl, and altogether out of place there. But, oh! confusion of Babel! I never heard such a racket as them poor fools made. Then the outlaws' hosses hitched near got panic-struck, and got to breakin' loose, snortin', kickin' and squealin'. I'll bet sich a rattle of hoofs hasn't been heard since Noah opened his ark and the animals went rollin' like an avalanche down the rocky sides o' Arrarat. To-morrow some o' them varlets'll go afoot if they go at all."

"Say," observed Bandy, "I wonder if 'tarn't 'bout time them terrors had themselves gathered up. They seem to 'a' grown awful still. Reckon they arn't afeard o' Bina hittin' 'em another diff."

It was nearly an hour before any signs of life could be seen about the camp. A little speck of light was the first thing observed. This grew

larger and larger and finally bloomed out into a roaring camp-fire.

Bandy, Flea, and Ajax saw that the enemy were considerably demoralized—that a number of them were dead, and others burnt by the explosion and otherwise injured.

Ajax at once suggested that they bring the other boys down from camp and charge the enemy while in their excited and panicky condition, but Kit Bandy thought such a movement might prove disastrous—at least, dangerous. Moreover, the old detective, after the experience in the outlaws' and red-skins' hands, was in no condition to fight.

"It are not often, boys," the old man said, "that Kit Bandy isn't ready for fight or fun. If Tommy Rattler was here the fight might proceed. I've as much faith in him as Napoleon had in Corporal O'Rourke at the battle o' Waterloo—Oh! see there! reinforcements have arriv' on the scene o' Bina's Buster."

True enough, the mountaineers saw four horsemen ride into the camp from up the canyon. That they were friends of the allies was evident in the warm reception given them.

The four new-comers dismounted, hitched their horses to the nearest bushes, and then from the lips of an outlaw received the story of the death of Seth Bonnet and the terrible disasters that had followed his taking off.

One of the four was a stout, thick set man of about forty years, with a short neck, upon which was set a chunky head, and a face covered with a short, black beard. Taken altogether, the fellow looked like an Australian bush-ranger; but Kit Bandy recognized him, despite the intervening distance, as the surviving leader of the Bonnet-Mondays—in fact, Bill Monday himself.

Judith Bonnet was finally seen to come from her lodge and shake hands with Monday. The presence of her father's partner in sin caused her grief to burst forth anew, and after she had become somewhat composed she led him to the tent where the body lay.

When Bill Monday came out he seemed frenzied with rage, and calling his men around him, and raising his hand toward heaven, he was heard to swear:

"Men, by the heavens above us the death of Seth Bonnet shall be avenged. I care not whether Kit Bandy is possessed of one or a hundred lives!"

"Oh, Psalms o' David! horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, in a lugubrious tone, "it does seem that I'm popular in these 'ere regions. Ajax—you ought to be proud—stuck away up to be in the society of Ka-ristopher Ko lumbus Bandy. Avenger the death o' Seth Bonnet! I wonder if the chuckle-headed bushranger'd cork hisself if he knew the object o' his wrath war takin' in the show within six rods and ear-shot o' him. Oh, wouldn't I like to yelp! But it's all right; the feller that's quickest with his hammer-handle'll get there. I'll take chances. But come, boys, my blood's stagnatin'; let's get to camp."

Without further delay the three hastened back to their own camp to find Tom Rattler still absent, and the amateurs in great excitement and suspense over the terrible explosion they had heard and the prolonged absence of their friends.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE MURDER AT BIRD'S RANCH.

TOM RATTLER's friends anxiously awaited his return. Bandy did not like to take any further steps until he could have the benefit of the old hunter's skill and experience; and while awaiting his return, the Mountain Detective took Ajax aside and with him discussed the situation.

"Ajax," he said, "in Miss Dustan we have a precious charge, and we're goin' to have all we can do to save her from them enraged white and red varlets."

"Well, we'll do all in our power to save her," bravely responded the young giant. "I have hopes that we'll be reinforced by her friends for, surely, they'll make some effort to follow her captors, and unless they fall into the enemy's hands may be along soon."

"That's catchin' onto a straw, boy," Bandy replied, "but when a feller's drownin' a straw's woth somethin'. You see the foe are between us and her friends, and they'll keep every avenue closely guarded. To elude them by crossin' the mountains to the west is our best show, and yet a terrible undertakin'."

"I'm ready for anything, Kit. As the boys have already told you they have a friend lost, or rather secreted, somewheres in the hills, and it's to find him we're staying here. His release

has been promised us by that Mysterious Girl, but she may be the daughter of an outlaw and unable to fill her promise when the time comes. It's a queer state of affairs, Bandy."

"Ajax," said Kit confidently, "my whole life has been spent on the prairies and in the mountains. I have made men's character a life study, and I can instinctively tell at sight, just what there's in a man. Now, I take you for one that can be trusted with a secret."

"I believe you're right, Kit, if I do say so myself."

"I want to tell you somethin', Ajax," Bandy went on; "the secret of my mission in this purgatorial country: I am here searchin' for a murderer and robber whom I have reason to believe is hid among the fastnesses of these hills. And the facts are these: four years ago last July the stage-coach on the old Pierre Route drew up at Bird's Ranch one night. A fearful storm was ragin' at the time. Bridges had been swept away and all streams were overflowing with raging floods. The stage could proceed no further. The one from the east had also reached the ranch loaded with passengers and it, too, was compelled to lay over. Sleepin' room under a dry roof at the ranch that night was at a premium, and several were compelled to seek rest in the stables and elsewhere."

"Sam Janeway was the driver on the east-bound coach that night. There were eight passengers besides the Wells and Fargo Express messenger, Gilbert Finwick, who had in charge a big sum of money."

"On reaching Bird's Ranch and finding the place crowded, Howard Fielding, George Carson and the Express messenger, Gilbert Finwick, concluded to remain in the coach until morning. It was dry, and each having a seat to himself, thought he could pass a more comfortable night there than in the overcrowded, leaky-roofed station-house."

"The storm raged all night, and it was still raining in the morning; but the station was startled by the news that Gilbert Finwick had been murdered and the money in his possession spirited away. Suspicion at once became fixed upon the two passengers that slept with him in the coach, Fielding and Carson. They protested their innocence to the last. Their feet and clothing showed that they had been out in the mud and rain. This they admitted. They had stepped out of the coach along in the night during a lull in the storm, so they said. They claimed that they were out but a few minutes, and that when they returned Finwick was gone. He did not come back, and s'posin' he had gone to the house, they thought no more about it until the lifeless body of Finwick was found about twenty rods from the station with two knife-stabs over the heart."

"The case against Fielding and Carson was strong, and yet there were those who believed that if they'd committed the robbery and murder they would never have remained there in the coach. You see, all tracks and traces of the murderers had been washed out by the heavy rain. Opinion was about divided as to the guilt or innocence of Fielding and Carson; but the matter was finally settled, to a certain extent, by Sam Janeway, the stage driver. It seems he slept, or endeavored to sleep, in a dug-out in the hillside not far from the station. There was no door to the place, and every flash of lightning enabled him to see all outside within range of his vision. The ranch and his own coach were right before him, and not over ten rods away. In the night, during the heaviest of the storm, he saw two men leave the coach, carrying something between them—saw this during a flash of lightning. As it was several minutes before it lightened again, the men had passed out of his range of vision. At first, he thought it was two men carrying a trunk between them, and s'posing it was some of the passengers carrying their trunk in, he thought no more about the matter until the news of the messenger's death startled the ranch."

"This evidence of Janeway's was conclusive, for it stood to reason that no two men could go to the coach, murder and rob the messenger without Fielding and Carson knowin' somethin' about it more than they claimed to know."

"It looks that way, indeed," declared Ajax, deeply interested in the old man's story.

"Well," Kit went on, "Judge Lynch at once convened court, and just about dark next day they took Fielding and Carson out to hang 'em. Carson was the first victim, and died protesting his innocence to the last; but while he was being executed, Fielding by some means or other made his escape, and despite the ten thousand reward offered for his capture he is still at large. A dozen detectives have been tryin' to run him

down, and 'bout six months ago the case was submitted to me by a Pinkerton who had trailed Fielding to Bismarck and there lost all track of him. It appears he'd a young son and daughter who met him there, when all three disappeared as suddenly and mysteriously as though dissolved into vapor.

"But I took up the case where the Pinkerton left off, and inch by inch, and step by step, have Ichabod Flea and I followed that coldest of cold trails until we have got Howard Fielding and his family located in these hills. But the next thing, and one that's bothered us for a month, is to find that location. I am satisfied that the Mysterious Girl, as you boys call her, or Leah, that she told Sabina was her name, is the daughter of Howard Fielding."

"Then you believe Fielding guilty?" Ajax observed.

"The evidence is murderously strong ag'inst him," answered Kit. "If he was innocent, why did he flee? Why does he hide away?"

"I should say he fled to escape Carson's fate, whether innocent or guilty; a man can't entertain hope in the hands of a mob. There's no chance to plead for a stay of proceedings. It's run or die. Even when he runs he must hide away if innocent, for many an innocent man has died on the scaffold, and at the hands of the inexorable Judge Lynch."

"That's all Gospel truth, Ajax," continued Bandy; "Fielding may be an innocent man; but that doesn't concern me; I have only to find the man and others are to find the evidence. It's true that in Iowa where Mr. Fielding lived for years he bears the reputation of an upright citizen and Christian gentleman. His daughter Bertha is now a young woman of eighteen, or thereabouts, and his son Sanford two years older."

"Was the stolen money ever recovered?" questioned Ajax.

"Not a dollar of it, though the most careful search was made for it. The theory is that Fielding and Carson had confederates near who carried the money off, and that they are now jointly or otherwise enjoying their thousands as well as a murderer can enjoy wealth purchased with blood. This, now, is my secret. You know why I am here. I want your help to find the hiding-place of that Mysterious Girl. To find it will be to find, in my honest opinion, Howard Fielding."

"And Frank Damon," added Ajax; "for if that girl is the daughter of Fielding, then our young friend is held a prisoner—a wounded one, at that—in the hidden home of the fugitive. So it will be to our mutual interests to hunt together."

"This much settled, I now want to make a suggestion to you, Mr. Bandy."

"Call me Ole Kit, please," requested Bandy; "but fire away with your suggestion, boy."

"Do you know where Alcove Grotto is?"

"Slept there mor'n twenty times."

"Then you know it is well watered, and handsomely protected on all sides except the approach from the canyon. Now, why not move to the Grotto, and once there, we can make it a base of operations, as well as an impregnable fortress?"

"Boy, your big head's full o' wisdom as an eel's full o' flesh; I'm in for that very thing. Let's talk with the other boys, pack up our traps, and amble off, for the journey will be a long, laborious, and, maybe, a dangerous one."

So saying, the two men arose and hastened back to inform their friends of their new plans; and in less than an hour they were off on their journey for the Grotto.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STARTLING SHRIEK.

At a point in Bickwaurth Canyon there is a low, wide cavity in the mountain-side over which projects from the almost perpendicular heights a mighty archway or awning of rock. The opening was two rods wide, but extended only about twenty feet into the hill. There were, however, a dozen little chambers, or alcoves, from one to fifteen feet deep opening into the main entrance, and from this fact the place had become known among the hunters and others as Alcove Grotto.

It was a splendid place of defense, being protected from above by the drooping awning of rock and flanked on each side by high, rocky ridges. The mouth of the grotto opened on a level with the canyon. A little stream of water, creeping from the crevices of the rocks, found its way across the area in front of the grotto and dropped with a musical, tiny voice into a deep, yet narrow channel running parallel with the canyon. This channel, above where the little spring from Alcove Grotto emptied into it,

was dry. It had been the course of a rapid mountain-stream which months before had cut a new channel and was then running near the center of the canyon. Beyond this dry ditch from the grotto was a body of pine timber, and through this only could the cavern be reached.

In this place Kit Bandy and his party took up their quarters after a long and tedious journey from the scene of their late exploits. It was past noon when they reached there, tired and hungry; and as food was scarce the first thing to be done was to secure some game, and Ajax and Bob Boscobel at once went in quest of it.

As deer and other game were coming down from their summer haunts in the mountains the hunters had no difficulty in securing an abundance of venison, and that evening the party had a royal feast in the grotto.

Nothing had yet been heard of Tom Rattler. Edith Dustan was still with the party, feeling perfectly secure in the care of the gallant and kind-hearted mountaineers.

Ichabod Flea had laid aside his female garb for the time being and appeared in buckskin—a dapper, little, old borderman, whose brusque ways and whimsical observations afforded the party much amusement and had a cheering effect upon the spirits of all.

The first night at the grotto was a quiet one and the party secured much-needed rest and sleep.

The next morning Ajax and Ichabod Flea put in a few hours reconnoitering the surrounding hills. Along about noon the latter returned having discovered no signs of enemies in the direction he had been. Ajax, however, did not return when expected. The day passed away and another night closed in, finding the Infant Giant still absent. His friends grew uneasy. The fear of having met some danger was forced upon them, and anxiety and suspense now reigned in the grotto.

Men were posted in the timber to watch the approach to the cave and guard against surprise.

The fire by which their supper had been cooked was permitted to burn awhile after nightfall in hopes its light might in some way aid the return of the absent Ajax.

An hour or two went by. Kit Bandy was uneasy and restless. He paced to and fro within the grotto in silence—something unusual with him.

"Kit," said Dick Randall, "it seems peculiarly still outside to-night, as well as in this grotto. Old friend, I'm afraid you're not feelin' the very best."

"I'm not, Dick," returned the old detective; "the silence is oppressive, and I never felt so bad but what somethin' happened. It are the calm before the storm, as they say."

"Pard," said Dick, "I'm afeard you're a little superstitious."

"Well, I think I'll put out the fire, superstition, or not," said the old man, and as he turned to extinguish the light a wild, unearthly shriek pierced through the night. I came from the heights overhanging the Grotto.

In a moment every man was upon his feet. A shower of dirt and gravel came pouring over the archway to the ground before them, raising a little cloud of dust.

"By the horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Old Kit, "somebody's in trouble on the heights! Can it be our big friend?"

Before any one could reply another unearthly cry came trailing down from above, and then a human form shot across the opening and fell with a sickening crash upon the earth at the mouth of the grotto, a bleeding, broken, lifeless mass!

CHAPTER XV.

AJAX'S DARING DEED.

A SHUDDER of horror passed over the old detective and his friends as they gazed upon the lifeless form that lay within plain sight of them. Their first thought was of Ajax, and that it was his body that had fallen from the heights, but a second glance told them it was the body of an Indian warrior that lay quivering before them.

But how had he come there? Had he been reconnoitering the whites' position, slipped and fallen from the steep and dizzy heights? or had his fall been the result of an encounter with an enemy?

These were the questions the mountaineers asked each other; but no one could answer. The only thing of which they were sure was of their whereabouts being known to the Indians, for there was no doubt of the dead warrior having been a scout.

"You see," said Old Kit, "that calm I spoke

of brought the storm, and now for fear o' a hurricane we'd better git ourselves into good fight-in' trim. If Ajax 'd only get around now and the red varmints did come, they'd find Alcove Grotto a wild-eyed tempest's nest."

"I am here, Kit!" exclaimed a voice from behind.

"Horn o' Joshua!" exclaimed Kit in surprise, his face lighting up with joy, "it's the Infant—all o' him sound and well!"

"You bet it is, Bandy," responded the young Giant glancing at the lifeless form of the red-skin, a grim smile upon his big, freckled face; "but did you folks hear something drap?"

"You big rascal! do you think we're deaf and dumb? did you do that?" pointing to the body.

"I rather think I thumbed that varmint's dew-lap a few minutes ago," was the response.

"You great scamp! what'd ye want to chuck the varlet down there for and muss up our doorway? You scart my friends' most outen their boots, an' bu'sted up my superstition."

"Well, it was easier," Ajax explained, "to bounce him over the cliff into the happy hunting-grounds than by any other route. I got sight of the coyote long in the afternoon and I've been shadowing him ever since. I knew he was an Injin scout. I watched him crawl out upon the narrow ledge above and endeavor to get a peep into our retreat, and when he started back I met him and fired him into the atmosphere. 'Oh! how he did split the air when I grappled him!'"

"You're a darlin', Ajax," Kit declared; "I don't s'pose I could 'a' done the job much neater and superbustic. But say, kid, are there any other red-skins about?"

"Plenty of them."

"Horn o' Joshua! where?"

"'Bout two miles east of here, north of the Chalk Bluffs."

"Outlaws with them?"

"That's what I propose to find out next—this very night."

"See or hear anything o' Tommy Rattler or the Mysterious Gal o' the Hills?"

"Nothin' whatever."

"Poor Rattler!" sighed Kit, "I'm afeard, I'm afeard somethin' has happened the old buccaneer."

Having eaten some cold broiled venison and conversed awhile with his friends, Ajax again took his departure from camp.

"A brave and gallant youth," declared Old Kit as he watched the young Giant disappear in the gloom, "but he's in love surer than death."

"With whom?" asked Dick Randall, with a significant glance at Miss Dustan.

"With that outlaw's darter," answered Bandy; "I've see'd, in my time, haydoogins o' love-sick lads and lassies, and know how they act—ay! and know jist how they feel, for, by the Horn o' Joshua! I've been in love a thousand times myself with as many different feminines, but not a consarned single fem. has ever reciprocated. I don't know why, either—can't understand it. I'd make a splendid match."

Bandy had spoken truer than he really knew in regard to Ajax's feelings; but the young mountaineer hardly knew himself what strange power was taking possession of him, and leading him on to deeds of daring and perilous adventures.

The young Giant was not long in reaching a point from whence he could see the light of the Indian camp-fire which burned upon a broad, sparsely-timbered ledge or terrace high up on the mountain-side. But to reach a point from whence he could obtain the information he sought—whether the Bonnet-Monday outlaws—also, Judith Bonnet, were with the Indians—was a task that would require all his skill as a scout and hunter. He was satisfied that the red-skins would doubly-guard their camp after the surprises they had met with a few nights before. Moreover, they had selected a spot for camp where the natural advantages would afford them a strong defense.

Nothing daunted, the young mountaineer moved forward. He soon reached the foot of the acclivity and began toiling slowly and carefully up its rocky, brush-covered side, guided somewhat in his course by the bars of light that shot out from the camp-fire into the darkness overhead. Inch by inch, and foot by foot, he approached the camp. Finally he found himself upon a narrow ledge about twenty feet below that on which the foe were located. It was a dangerous place—much like that over Alcove Grotto, where he had entrapped the Indian scout a few hours before.

Facing the Indian camp the wall rose up perpendicular before him, while behind him there

was an unbroken fall of a thousand feet. He knew not how much further he could proceed along the ledge, and hesitated to advance through fear of being cut off entirely should his presence be discovered.

He had, however, gained the nearest point possible to the enemy. He could hear them talking on the plateau above, but the high embankment shut out all view.

After waiting there a few minutes he concluded to retrace his steps from the ledge and endeavor to approach the camp from another direction, but he had scarcely come to this conclusion when his ears were greeted by the sound of a female voice coming from the top of the rock directly overhead. It sent a wild thrill through his great heart, for he instantly recognized it as the voice of Judith, the daughter of Seth Bonnet; but he instantly realized that something was wrong, for she spoke in an excited tone.

Listening, he heard another voice—that of a white man—speaking in a low tone. His words were inaudible to the big scout, but he had no sooner ceased speaking than the girl cried out in a frantic voice:

"Back! go back! do not come near me or I will hurl myself over this precipice!"

"My God! what does that mean?" thought Ajax, the cold sweat starting from his brow, his hand clutching nervously at his belt, his eyes strained upward.

By leaning back slightly the young mountaineer caught sight of the girl, her form boldly outlined in the light of the camp-fire on the ledge before her. She stood on the very edge of the precipice, her face to the vile wretch who menaced her, her hands clinched, her form erect—her whole being the very picture of a tragic queen.

To her excited command that was accompanied with a threat of self-destruction, Ajax heard the reply in a calm, pleading tone:

"Judith, why be so foolish? You misjudge my motives. You had ought to know that I seek to promote your happiness as well as mine; and you do know it was your father's expressed wish that I look after and care for you should anything happen him. He's now dead. You're alone, and I desire to be your friend."

"My friend you may be," the girl responded, her words being quite audible to Ajax, "but your wife I will never, never be, Bill Monday!"

"Ah!" thought the Infant Giant, as the blood began leaping through his veins, "so her persecutor is that lunk-headed outlaw, Bill Monday, and he is tryin' to compel her to be his wife! Gods! what a cruel world this is! Man, as well as the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and inhabitants of the deep, preys upon the weaker of his kind. Bill Monday has got to die, or else—"

His thoughts were here interrupted by the gruff voice of the outlaw saying:

"Judith, as my wife I can protect you against all harm and insults. No man'd dare insult or harm the wife of Bill Monday any more than the daughter of Seth Bonnet."

"You can be my friend and protect me," retorted the fearless girl, "without my becoming your wife. But you would wreck my whole life. You are not my friend—you are my enemy!"

"Tut! tut! girl, you know better than that," the outlaw said. "You know that I have always admired—loved you. Moreover, you should remember you are an outlaw's daughter, and could never expect to be the wife of any one else than an outlaw. Who but an outlaw would marry an outlaw's girl?"

These words, calculated to humble the spirit of the proud, defiant girl, caused the blood to fairly surge through the veins of the Infant Giant, and there was nothing on earth, had he possessed it, but what he would have given then, to have been within reach of Bill Monday.

"I may be an outlaw's daughter—in fact, I am," Judith responded, "but I am not responsible for that. And you know I never approved of the life my father led, and that I daily importuned him to give up his wrong-doing and turn to an honest calling. As for myself, I call on Heaven to witness that I have never sinned in deed or thought, and I would rather—ten thousand times rather—die than be forced into a marriage against which my very soul revolts!"

"Oh, come! come! don't be so silly, Judith," Monday said, half vexed, half coaxing; "go back to your tent and think this matter over calmly. See how you and I are situated, and how much better it'll be for me to guard you as my wife."

"I can quickly relieve you of all responsibilities on my account," returned the girl, "by leaving your presence. There are others besides outlaws whose friendship and protection I am not afraid nor ashamed to seek."

"Ha!" sneered the baffled outlaw, "I presume you have reference to that elephant, Ajax, who, after killin' your father, befriended you simply to gain a point—an excuse to get into our camp."

"I believe that Ajax is a brave and gallant man!" responded Judith, her voice strong with emotion, "and would not claim my soul simply for protecting my body from insult and injury!"

"Well, Judith," Monday declared, in a determined tone, "I see there is no use talkin' to you—you will not listen to reason or argument. You will have to accept the consequence, and that consequence is myself. I do not propose to be dallied and trifled with longer. Come, you will go at once to your tent!"

"Never! go back!—back, Bill Monday!" shrieked the maiden, her slender form swaying like a reed in the wind upon the edge of the rock.

Ajax now saw that the most important moment of his eventful life had come. He must act if he would save the girl. Quickly he planted his feet firmly on the ledge, his arms raised and his shoulders thrown back until they actually hung over the awful precipice behind. With hands and eyes uplifted he was about to call out to the girl to jump, when, with a despairing cry, she lost her balance, fell backward over the cliff and shot downward into the abysmal gloom.

CHAPTER XVI.

SAVED AND LOST.

FIRMLY planted upon the ledge, with every nerve strung to its utmost tension, his mind wrought with a desperate intensity, Ajax caught the falling body of Judith in his strong arms. But her weight striking with violence caused him to reel, and for a moment he tottered on the brink of the precipice, and a brief and desperate struggle ensued—a struggle to regain his balance—a struggle in which his very bones and the chords and muscles of his stalwart frame seemed to snap and creak under the mighty strain.

Ajax knew from the first that the chance of saving the girl's life and his own was but one in a thousand, but he took that chance and won. By his superhuman effort—an effort that seemed to defy the very law of gravitation, he succeeded in throwing himself forward, falling upon his knees with his face to the wall above him and the maiden in his arms.

It was several moments before the daring hunter could realize that he was really safe and that he had saved the girl from death. And now he grew almost dizzy and faint on realizing what he had dared to undertake—dumfounded by the daring of his own deed.

Kneeling he held the form of the unconscious girl in his arms, gazing at the black wall before him until he could compose his mind and steady his nerve. He could feel the beating of her heart against his own breast, and with every pulsation there was a responsive throb in his own great, gallant heart.

The murmur of excited voices on the terrace above at once fell upon his ears, but he heeded them not. He remained kneeling in the shadows. He knew that silence was now his only hope.

Bill Monday, hearing no sound come up from the black gulf, laid down upon his stomach and craned his neck over the edge of the rock as if to search the darkness below.

As if actuated by some invisible power Ajax looked up at this moment. He saw and recognized the bullet-head of the outlaw against the red banner of light flung out into the darkness by the camp-fire, and the very sight of the villain aroused within him a spirit of blind rage. Drawing his revolver he fired a shot upward at the black head; but no sooner had he done so than he regretted the indiscreet act, for no difference what had been the result of the shot, it told the savages of his presence and they heralded the discovery with a frightful yell.

Quickly rising to his feet, the young mountaineer began hastily retracing his steps along the ledge with the still unconscious girl in his arms. The path grew wider as he advanced, and finally he passed out upon broader grounds with a sloping hillside on his right. Here he made better speed, and having eluded the foe he made his way due south and finally entered what was known to the mountain-men as Chalk Hills, a great expanse of white, chalky rocks and peaks

bursting out on the side of the mountain like ugly blisters.

The Chalk Hills extended over an area of a thousand acres. Scrubby pine and hemlock-trees and bushes grew in the narrow vales. Deer-paths ran in every direction among the hills. A stream of water dashing down from the mountains swept half-across the place, plunged into a great opening in the earth with a hollow, choking gurgle and passing away through a subterranean channel appeared a mile below.

By this stream, and near where it plunged into the cavern, Ajax stopped. Dipping water in his hand he bathed the feverish brow of the unconscious girl, and this with the magnetic touch of his big hand soon revived her.

But in the darkness of the hills, with her brain in a fever, and the noisy, brawling stream filling her ears with strange sounds, it was some time before her rescuer could convince her that she had not passed into another world filled with darkness and horror, but was still in the world that had been so full of pain and sorrow to her.

However, when she came to understand that Ajax had saved her, and that she was even then supported by his arm, an expression of joy escaped her lips, and a moment of rapturous silence followed. But soon a bitter thought seemed to force its hateful self into her mind, and with a pang of returning pain she asked:

"Ajax, why did you not let me die? why risk your life to save mine when—"

"I considered your life worth the savin'," Ajax mildly interrupted.

"But this is not the first time nor even the second," the girl went on, "that you have taken great risks on my behalf."

"Nor it won't be the last, either, if you need my help. I made up my mind the night I wrung that Injin's neck that you were a girl worth fightin' for."

"Do you forget that I am an outlaw's daughter, Ajax?"

"Yes—no," was the contradictory answer; "I heard that chuckle-head Monday remind you of the fact; but, Miss Bonnet, I remember nothin'—care nothin' as to who you are; I know what you are and that's enough for me; and now your wish'll be law with me—wherever you desire to go, there will I conduct you."

"Oh, Ajax!" the girl cried, "you are so kind and brave, but"—and a bitter thought seemed to send a pang to her heart—"I have no place on earth to go to—no fr—"

"Don't say that, little woman," interposed Ajax, "don't; I am your friend until death. Let me take you to our camp over at Alcove Grotto. Miss Dustan is still with us, and she's an awful fine girl, and has been distressed half to death about you. She thinks you're an angel, and so there you have another friend. Besides there are several brave men there that'll die in your defense if you place yourself under their protection. Will you go with me, Miss Bonnet?"

"I cannot go back to my father's friends. Ajax, I accept your kind invitation and your protection, trusting in Heaven that some day I may be able to repay you."

"The knowledge of havin' done a good deed, and havin' it appreciated, always fully repays me for the doing of it," the young Giant replied, as he assisted the maiden to her feet.

Taking her by the hand he led her along the dark and narrow way among the Chalk Hills; but he had gone but a short distance when he heard something whizz past his ears and strike a rock beyond with a sharp, metallic click knocking sparks of fire from the stone.

Quickly Ajax drew his revolver and turned around to meet a skulking foe. A savage yell burst upon his ears and was answered by a shot from his revolver.

At the same moment, almost, he felt Judith's arm scratched from his own, while a cry of terror burst from her lips.

"Help! help, Ajax!" she cried, her voice receding into the hills, as she was being rapidly borne away by an unseen and unknown foe!

CHAPTER XVII.

JACK DREW, THE DETECTIVE-SCOUT.

AJAX'S shot was answered by the death-yell of a savage, although fired at random in the blinding darkness; but the young Giant's ears were instantly assailed by a war-whoop from a dozen throats, and mingled with this was the appealing cry of Judith Bonnet.

For once the valiant young Giant was fairly palsied by the terror of the situation. With a horde of infuriated demons crowding upon him from behind, and the appealing cries of the girl ringing in his ears from the right, he knew not

what to do—which way to turn. All was darkness. He could see nothing, but guided by the sounds of the approaching foe he fired three or four random shots in quick succession, then turned to follow Judith.

But in his haste and the darkness he missed the mouth of the side passage into which she had been dragged, and before he could correct the mistake the foe had cut him off and he was forced to flee for his own life. It was a bitter thing for him to have to do so, and once he stopped determined to fight, but his better judgment prevailed and he hurried on turning to the left as soon as an opening among the Chalk Hills could be found.

All hopes of rescuing the girl were now at an end—at least, for the time being, and a feeling akin to despondency filled the young man's breast. But this lasted but for a few moments. The words, "Help! help, Ajax!" were still ringing in his ears, and a responsive answer was given in the wild throbbing of his great heart.

Having eluded the foe he turned his face once more in the direction of the Indian camp on the mountain terrace. He felt satisfied that Judith had been stolen from his side by red-skins, and that she would be taken back to the camp.

He had gone but a short ways, however, when his ears were assailed by a short, sharp, bark of a revolver over among the hills. This report was repeated half a dozen times, and became mingled with savage yells.

"By the willows o' Babylon!" Ajax exclaimed to himself, "somebody over there's pepperin' the red devils handsomely! I wonder if Kit Bandy isn't loose in these hills? The Lord grant he may be, and that he has rescued the girl."

The conflict was of short duration. All became quiet, and the result being unknown, only served to increase the mental anxiety of the young mountaineer.

Fast as possible he moved along through the Chalk Hills, and finally came again in sight of the Indian-outlaw camp. A fire was burning brightly and figures could be seen moving about in its light.

Keeping well up on the plateau the Giant scout crept as close as it was possible for him to the camp. A growth of stunted pines and dense undergrowth afforded him a good cover for reconnoitering.

The first discovery he made after stretching himself flat upon the earth under some bushes, was Bill Monday sitting bolstered up with blankets against a rock. His head was bandaged, and a man was seated at his side fanning him with a hat.

But few outlaws and Indians were to be seen around, and as Judith Bonnet had not been brought back to the camp yet, the scout made up his mind that most of the enemy were still out.

"By smoky!" mused the Giant as he gazed at the reclining outlaw chief; "I guess my bullet must 'a' peeled William Monday's noggin pretty close. At any rate, he appears to be a very sick man, and I've a notion to relieve him of his misery by another shot. I hate to see a man suffer."

The last remark was unconsciously made aloud, and scarcely had it been muttered when a subdued voice within arm's reach of him, said:

"Oh, ye do, do ye?"

Ajax started, and quick as thought flitted the muzzle of his revolver in the direction whence the voice proceeded.

"Easy there—keep yer shirt on, smarty!" admonished the unknown.

"Who are you?" demanded Ajax, raising his revolver.

"Jack Drew—detective, scout, bummer."

"Jack Drew, of Deadwood?"

"Prezactly; who're you?"

"Ajax."

"Sword o' Damocles! Ajax, shove your quarter-acre hand this way. Glad to meet ye, Infant."

The two shook hands. They had met before. Creeping closer together they carried on a whispered conversation. Briefly, Ajax narrated his adventures of the night, when Jack Drew, in turn, informed him that he was there in search of Edith Dustan, whom he supposed to be in the power of the Indians.

When Ajax informed him of Edith's safety the old fellow's joy knew no bounds. He had come there to reconnoiter the enemy's camp, having left three friends in camp a mile or two away; and soon as he learned of the girl's whereabouts he invited Ajax to go with him to his friends, and then all would accompany the giant to the grotto.

While they were thus conversing their atten-

tion was attracted by the appearance of two Indians in camp. They were somewhat excited, as was evidenced by their wild gestures while imparting some information to their friends.

And still a little later, a dozen outlaws and Indians came in, in a body, bringing with them three or four wounded comrades, who were cursing and groaning between oaths, with pain.

"Whoop-ee!" exclaimed Jack Drew in a whisper, punching Ajax in the ribs; "the red vagrants hev been in a tarrant'ler's nest, haven't they?"

"Yes, and if I was sure," replied Ajax, "that Judith Bonnet was not in their power, I'd be for you and I raidin' them, two-score though they be. You can see they're all broke-up—excited—rattled. It'd ease my mind wonderful to put the finishin' touches on Bill Monday."

"Boy, you're a stem-winder hurricane, I know, and I'd like to see a specimen o' your work; but I'd advise you to keep in the shades. An attack might be bad for you, and a Dam-oled sight wu'sser for the gal, Judea. Give Billy Monday a chance to make peace with his Maker, for the way he reposes 'g'inst that rock, it strikes me he's peepin' over the precipice into the Valley o' Shaders."

For over two hours the scouts lay there watching the movements of the foe. Those that had gone out hours before in pursuit of the Infant Giant, came straggling back in a downcast and demoralized condition. But none of them brought Judith, and finally Ajax's feelings alternated between hope and fear—hope that the girl was safe—fear that she had been slain in the darkness among the Chalk Hills.

Finally the scouts took their departure for Drew's camp.

When they reached it they found the old man's friends in an uneasy frame of mind over his prolonged absence.

Drew introduced Ajax to his companions, Perry Gray, Alf Basset and Joseph Jolly, or "Jolly Joe," as he was better known at Cinnabar, where he was in business. All three were young men, comparatively speaking. Jolly Joe was perhaps five-and-thirty, but he carried his years as lightly as a man of twenty-five. He had a well-built form, a round, florid face, black, curly hair, a heavy, dark mustache and imperial.

He was dressed in a suit of black corduroy, buckskin leggings, Indian moccasins and soft felt hat; and altogether he had the appearance of a man of ease and pleasure, if not slight traces of dissipation.

This may all be accounted for when the reader is informed that Jolly Joe was the proprietor of the "Modern Mecca," one of the finest saloons and most respectable (?) gaming parlors in all Cinnabar City.

But what was Jolly Joe doing there in that dangerous mountain? Like a brave man and true, he had taken his life in his hand, and gone forth to assist in the rescue of Edith Dustan, of whom he was a great admirer. Everybody knew that Jolly Joe was infatuated with that fair girl. In fact, he openly admitted it, and he was the first man to offer Jack Drew his services in aiding the rescue of the maiden.

Jack Drew was the same good-natured, fearless old borderer with whom we met, kind reader, years before. He was a boon companion of Jolly Joe, and made the Modern Mecca his headquarters when in town, often assisting at the bar during a rush of "pilgrims."

Knowing Drew's skill as a hunter of men, Edith's mother, a widowed lady whose soul was bound up in her love for her daughter, selected him to lead in the search for the girl. A hundred brave men quickly volunteered to go with him, but their service was respectfully declined. The old mountaineer claimed that four good men would do more than a hundred, and so he selected his party and started in pursuit.

When Jolly Joe learned that Edith was safe his joy knew no bounds, and he became impatient to start at once for the grotto.

In a few minutes, however, after Drew and Ajax's arrival, they broke camp and struck out through the hills; but despite their best efforts it was broad daylight when they reached the grotto and found the party there just sitting down to breakfast. But food for the time being was neglected, and everybody joined in welcoming the return of Ajax and the coming of the men from Cinnabar.

Kit Bandy and Jack Drew had met before, and being men much alike in many respects, their greeting was as amusing as demonstrative.

Edith Dustan was almost overwhelmed with joy on meeting her friends, but Ajax noticed that there was not that warmth of feeling on

her part toward Jolly Joe as should characterize the meeting of lovers under such circumstances. He also observed, or else imagined that he did, that Joe felt keenly her indifference to him; although the young giant might not have noticed it had Drew not told him of the man's great admiration for the maiden.

Drew and his friends breakfasted with those at the grotto, and while they were eating Ajax narrated his adventures of the night at the enemy's camp, his good luck and bad, ending with the declaration that he intended to continue his search for Judith Bonnet to the furthest ends of the earth but what he would save her from the power of Bill Monday.

CHAPTER XVIII.

TOM RATTLER TURNS UP.

AFTER breakfast Jack Drew and Kit Bandy held a long talk together, though the latter disclosed none of his secrets to his fellow man-hunter more than to inform him that he was there in pursuance of his calling—on a trail that was getting quite warm.

"So'm I on a trail, and have been for three or four years," Jack Drew said, when Bandy had finished, and though it has been warm—almost hot—for the life o' me I can't run the thing down; and seein' you're handy with your brain-works, lip and lungs, Kit, I'm goin' to give you a pointer and maybe you can help corrille my game. You've heard o' the big robbery and murder o' Gilbert Finwick, an Express-messenger, at Bird's Ranch four years ago, haven't you?"

"I should say I had," Kit responded, with a quizzical look.

"Well, you remember they hung one of the murderers, George Carson, and the other escaped from the mob?"

"Remember it well, Jack."

"Thousands were offered for Howard Fielding's arrest," Drew continued, "but after lookin' the grounds over I made up my mind that Fielding and Carson never murdered Finwick—that another fellow or fellows done the deed."

"Then why should Fielding run away and keep hid away?" quoth Kit, with a discrediting shake of the head.

"Humph!" ejaculated Drew, "when a mob hangs an innocent man, what show is there for the other chap accused of the same crime, with the halter already 'round his neck, 'cept in flight? I tell you, Kit Bandy, there's no time for a man to stand and argy with a mob that's set on hangin' him. So, if my theory of that murder and robbery is correct and the guilty man can be brought to justice, you'll see Howard Fielding step forth to freedom."

"You're visionary, Jack, visionary as Old Tom Rattler," declared Bandy, with a laugh; "but, by the way, Jack, have you seen Rattler lately?"

"Not for some time."

"He was at our camp a few nights ago and disappeared all to oncet, and the Lord only knows where he is—whether dead or alive. Tom Rattler war a noble ole buccaneer."

"And can see into a mill-stone as deep as any one," declared Drew. "Tom'd 'a' made a good detective if his early eddycation hadn't been neglected."

"He'd ought to be good, anyhow," observed old Kit facetiously, "for he's 'sociated with me a great deal."

Drew smiled blandly and turned to Ajax, who, in company with Ichabod Flea, was just about starting for the Chalk Hills.

"Off are you, boys?" he asked.

"Yes; you needn't look for me until I get back—"

"Yoop! mornin', folkses!"

This salutation came from the lips of a man who suddenly burst into camp like a whirlwind.

"Horn o' old Joshua!" exclaimed Bandy, his face beaming with joy, "it's old Tom Rattler, the lost lamb o' beauty!"

"Yes, it's the thunder-gust and spiral whirlwind, Kitsie," responded old Tom, throwing his cap upon the ground and looking around him at the happy, smiling faces; "and I see you are all here lookin' well and happy, and—hullo! here's old Sabina, big Ajax—and, by Rosycrusians! if here isn't the sublime face o' old Jack Drew! and there's Jolly Joe! Well, well, havin' a camp-meetin' here with Kit Bandy for presidin' elder?"

The old borderer shook hands with everybody, mopped the perspiration from his brow with his cap, then turning to Ajax, said:

"My boy, I've got a message for you."

"A message for me?" repeated Ajax in surprise.

"Yes, here she am," and he took a folded

paper from his pocket and handed it to the mountaineer.

Opening the missive Ajax saw written thereon in pencil these words:

"AJAX:—My kind, noble friend, I hope this will find you living and unharmed. I cannot explain here how I escaped from the red-skins last night; but I am well and safe, and did I know you were the same, I could rest easy.

"Your friend,

"JUDITH BONNET."

"Smoly hoke!" burst from the young man's lips, as he fixed his eyes, sparkling with joy, upon those of old Tom, "where did you get this, Rattler?"

"'Bout six or ten miles north of here," answered the hunter.

"What is it, anyhow? Read, read!" exclaimed Bandy.

Ajax read the note.

"By the horn o' old Joshua!" cried Kit.

"Sword o' Damocles!" added Drew.

"Tom," said Ajax, "did the outlaw's daughter give you this?"

"I'm not sure who it was," Rattler answered, "but I think it was the Mysterious Girl o' the Hills. I'll tell ye how it was: I was passin' along the foot of a high hill this mornin' quite early when I heard some one call to me from above. I looked up and see'd a gal standin' away, 'way up on a ledge. I tried to faint at sight o' her in hopes she'd come down and fan me; but it war too early in the mornin' for swoonin' purposes, and so I just made a little stagger, flung a kiss at her, and invited her to spread her wings and sail down to me and carry me off to her haunts. But instead o' that she turned up her elegant little nose and asked me if I'd do her a favor. I answered that I'd upset the mountains if she asked me to. She smole an impatient smile, then opened her door-to-paradise mouth and asked me if I'd deliver a message for her to Ajax, the Baby Giant. I had a notion to say no for fear it was a love letter—"

"Oh, you poor old fool!" ejaculated Bandy; "you're gittin' wuss and wuss, ar'n't you, Tom?"

"I finally told her," Rattler went on, as if he had not noticed Bandy's interruption, "that I'd deliver the message, and asked where I could meet her to deliver a reply, and when. She tossed the paper to me sayin' I needn't bother about a reply. My heart fell ker chug cl'ar to the bottom. With a wave of her little hand she disappeared and my dream was ended."

"Tom Rattler, a woman'll be the death o' you yit," Old Kit observed; "won't you never learn anything?"

"Not if I sociate with inferiors like some cattle I know of," answered Rattler, with a wink at Ajax. "But it does me a power o' good just to do a leetle fightin' for a pretty woman, and hear 'em lip off their pretty thanks softened by tears."

"Well," Ajax finally said, "this message puts an end to my trip back to the Chalk Bluff; but the next thing is to find where the girl is."

"She must be," said Bob Boscobel, "at the same place that our friend Frank Damon is."

"What kind of an outfit must they be?" queried Bandy, "takin' our friends and sweet-hearts and keepin' 'em hid away promisin' to release 'em at some future time. I don't like it. There's somethin' wrong 'bout it, boys."

"Seems a little singular," observed Jack Drew, "that with the famous Kit Bandy, and the renowned Tom Rattler, the secret hidin'-place o' that Mysterious Gal can't be found."

"It can and will be!" declared Ajax.

"That's the proper talk, 'Jaxy," said Kit, approvingly, "and if Tom Rattler'll lead us to the spot where the girl stood when she broke his heart and give him the note, I'll agree to trail her to her den even though she entraps me and makes me her prince as she has Tom her slave. What say you, Rat?"

"I'll go with you, Kitsie," answered Old Tom; "I want you to see the girl, so's I can see you perform. It alers did please me to see you ladle out honey-dew to a woman. I'll bet a bigger old fuddle can't be found this side o' a lunatic asylum. But git ready, Kitsie, and I'll lead you to your doom."

Arrangements were speedily made by Bandy and Ajax to accompany Rattler to the place of his interview with the girl. Jack Drew and his party agreed to remain at the grotto until they returned, and so it was with buoyant hopes they departed.

The day passed on leaden feet to those at the grotto. With the brave and fearless Ajax and Collicking Old Kit away, they could not feel

that sense of ease and safety they did when those two heroic men were present.

Shortly after dark Kit and Ajax returned footsore and disappointed. They had tramped the hills all day in fruitless efforts to find the hidden home of the Mysterious Girl; and in their wanderings they had become separated from Rattler and then could not find him either; so, altogether, their day's work resulted in a complete failure.

But, nothing daunted, the same two struck out on the same mission early the next morning, returning at night with the old story of nothing found.

This searching they kept up for four days, and then gave it up in complete disgust.

By this time it wanted but two days of the time set for the release of Frank Damon, and so they concluded to await their meeting with Damon in hopes he could unravel the mystery concerning the hidden retreat of the Mysterious Girl.

Night had again settled over the mountains. As no Indians had been seen for several days a fire was permitted to burn in the mouth of the grotto after dark, though they had never for a single moment permitted the guard to relax its vigilance.

Tom Rattler had not been seen since he first became separated from Ajax and Bandy in the hills, and again his friends became uneasy about it.

"He'll turn up when least expected," Kit Bandy said; "the old fool's 'bout crazy after that gal; but I guess he can't he'p it; there seems to be somethin' in the atmosphere that affects all the boys. Thar's Ajax, a Roman legion when it comes to facin' death and destruction—a Praetorian Guard when it comes to defendin' woman's life and virtue, and yet he is a slave to that dread thing called Love. Poor Old Rattler! Poor Ajax!"

Bandy's auditors indulged in a laugh at Ajax's expense; but the young Giant took it all in the best of spirits.

The night passed slowly away. It was near midnight when those seated by the fire heard one of the guards challenging some one.

Instantly all were upon their feet—all attention.

"It's me, Tom Rattler, and a friend," was the answer to the challenge given in a clear, ringing voice.

"Then advance."

The next moment the old hunter emerged from the darkness of the woods accompanied by a young man whose pale, emaciated face looked like that of a corpse in the dim glow of the camp-fire.

"My God!" exclaimed Perry Thorne at sight of the apparition, "it is the ghost of Frank Damon!"

CHAPTER XIX.

DEATH IN THE DRY CHANNEL.

FOR awhile the amateur hunters could scarcely believe the evidence of their own eyes—that Frank Damon stood before them. But when the pale, hollow-eyed man spoke they knew it was Frank, and rushed forward to greet him as one returned from the grave.

It was a happy meeting, indeed, and having conducted the young man to a seat in the grotto his friends sat down by him to hear the story of his adventures.

Meanwhile Kit Bandy turned to Tom Rattler and asked:

"Tom, where did you find that boy? Did that gal give him to you?"

"No, she didn't!" responded Tom; "I found him comin' down Crazy Canyon."

"By the horn o' Joshua! this breaks me all up, Rattler!"

"Ah, Kitsie! you and me are losin' our grip. We're gittin' old and our faculties are failin' us. We'll soon have to quit this business and go at something else."

Bandy knitted his brows, and taking a turn or two across the grotto in evident perplexity of mind, he seated himself near Damon in time to hear Bob Boscobel ask:

"Frank, where have you been concealed all these weeks?"

"I really can't tell you," was the surprising answer. "All I do know is this: the night I was wounded my horse carried me here and there and everywhere through the hills. You remember you tied me in the saddle. Well, I must have fainted from loss of blood, and while unconscious, was taken from the saddle by my rescuer, and into a great cavern where I found myself when I recovered my senses. Where that cavern is exactly I know not. It is a mon-

ster affair with acres of timber, a running stream of water and hidden entrance.

"Of the people there I have made a solemn pledge to say nothing, and, boys, I mean to keep that pledge. I do not know who or what they are; but I do know they saved my life, and showed me every kindness while with them within human power."

"And you have no idea where that cavern is?" Bandy asked.

"No, sir," answered Damon; "when I was about to leave I was blindfolded and then conducted from the cavern and away for miles and miles through the hills. If I was to judge by the distance traveled I should say the cavern was twenty or more miles from here. I was quite fortunate in falling in with Mr. Rattler. Now, friends, this is all I can or care to tell you about those kind, mysterious people."

This was a great disappointment to Bandy. Through Damon he had hoped to gain at least a clew to the mystery that had so long baffled him; but finding the young man placed upon his honor to keep all he knew a secret, he knew it was useless to question him further.

After the amateurs had talked over their adventures with their friend, Damon, a couch was prepared for him and he retired to rest.

Almost discouraged, Kit Bandy finally took Rattler aside and told him all about his being there in search of Howard Fielding, and sought to enlist the old hunter in his work.

"Horn o' Joshua!" he said, impatiently, "I was never bothered over anything in my life as I've been over this case. And what makes matters wuss is the Injins, for with fightin' them and the outlaws, and rescuin' a gal now and then, I can't do much of anything else. If I could ever git my eyes on that Mysterious Girl, I'd see her home or bust a lung tryin', and don't you disremember it, Thomas."

"Bah, Kitsie! the very sight o' that gal would turn your ole brain upside down. You'd see double-thrubble. Pretty girls would dance horn-pipes on a thousand ledges and mountain-tops, Cherubimic faces with roguish dimples and laughing eyes would peer at you from every nook and corner, and before you could git on-rattled, all'd be gone like the vision o' a dream, and you'd be left pumpin' air like a winded jassack. Kitsie, I never refused you a favor before, but I'll have to decline helpin' you hunt down that angel's nest."

"Tom, you're gittin' to be a regular old, orniscarnis fool. You ought to be put into a nunnery on bread and diluted water."

Rattler indulged in a good-natured laugh at his friend's perplexity; and then, as was his habit, he arose and went out to make a reconnaissance before retiring for the night.

He was gone but a few minutes when he returned whistling a sprightly air and keeping time with short, quick steps.

Most of the party had by this time retired, but making his way straight to Bandy's side, Rattler said:

"Kit, there's death in the channel out there! Git every man up without creatin' any excitement. There's an old-time, gory fight on hand. That dry ditch is full o' red-skins from one eend to t'other waitin' for a favorable opportunity to make Rome howl, and hull our heads!"

CHAPTER XX.

LIGHT BEGINNING TO BREAK.

WITHOUT A word, or the least apparent surprise, Kit Bandy received the startling news of the presence of red-skins, and at once quietly started to warn his friends. He went from man to man and in a whisper told him of the impending danger, and as quietly every man arose and armed himself for the fray.

Rattler threw additional fuel upon the fire so as to light up the space between the grotto and the channel, which was about six rods away at the edge of the timber. Then he walked boldly down the opening, stepped across the black ditch and entered the woods. Soon he returned with Dick Randall and Ichabod Flea, who had been on guard.

All retired to the grotto, concealing themselves, with rifles in hand, in the shadows of the little alcoves.

The minutes of suspense that now passed seemed like hours to the little band, who knew not how soon they might be stricken down by death.

"Rattler," Old Kit finally said, "are you sure you see'd red-skins in the ditch? Are you sure you're givin' us no trick?"

No answer from Rattler was required, for at this moment a score of savages arose as one from the channel, and with a fiendish yell, dashed toward the grotto, expecting to take the

whites by surprise. But the wily foe were the party surprised. Ten rifles rung out from the chambers of the grotto and as many savages went down killed or wounded.

Dumfounded the survivors halted, recoiled and would have fled had not at least fifty friends, outlaws and Indians, burst from the woods at this instant and joined them.

With a cry of vengeance the demoniac horde swept toward the grotto. The guns and revolvers of the whites rung out with a steady crash. At every shot a foe went down, but the converging of the enemy in front of the cavern kept their ranks filled, and soon the entrance to the grotto became a hornets' nest of death.

Face to face, and hand to hand, the gallant defenders met the foe. Kit Bandy, Tom Rattler and Jack Drew were a host within themselves and fought as men never fought before; while Ajax, with clubbed rifle became a whirlwind of death. In fact, every man fought with Spartan courage knowing full well that defeat meant death.

But one by one the defenders went down, and when at length the enemy began to waver, and finally turned and fled leaving half their number dead and wounded, half the defenders were also down.

In the center of a heap of dead savages lay the form of the Giant, Ajax, stretched upon the earth. Not far away lay Perry Thorne and two of the Cinnabar men dead. Joe Jolly lay near in great agony and, where the battle had raged the fiercest, Bob Boscobel was lying seriously wounded.

Bandy and Drew had received slight wounds, and but three had escaped unharmed.

Victory had been won at frightful cost, and the hearts of the victors grew sick as they looked upon the awful scene around them.

And then a surprise, almost provoking in character, awaited them. The smoke of battle had scarcely drifted from the Grotto when a long line of uniformed men with polished rifles marched into view from the woods. It was a company of soldiers—cavalry on foot—who had been drawn there by the sound of the fierce battle.

"Too late, Captain Nevins," said Kit Bandy, regretfully.

"You've had a bloody fight, friends," observed the officer; "which I fear has cost you dearly. We did our best to get here. We had just gone into camp about a mile from here when the fight began. What can we do for you?"

"Is there a surgeon with you?"

"Yes, at camp; I will send for him at once."

At this instant a cry burst from Kit Bandy's lips. He saw the body of Ajax move, then rise to a sitting posture.

"Glory to the god of hosts!" the old detective exclaimed, in tones of joy; "Ajax lives! the Roman legion will fling his banner to the breeze again! Hail! thou Praetorian Guard!"

He hurried to the young Giant's side, and found him covered with blood from half a dozen wounds.

"Boy, we won!" cried Old Kit, encouragingly; "you mashed a dozen o' the varlets. You're hurt, but good as a dozen dead men!"

A grim smile passed over the Giant's blood-stained face as he looked up, half bewildered, at Bandy, and then at the line of soldiers drawn up beyond the camp fire.

The surgeon soon arrived. Ajax's wounds were the first examined. They were pronounced dangerous, but not necessarily fatal, unless some unforeseen complication should set in.

Bob Boscobel's leg had been broken, and the surgeon was not sure, but was afraid it would have to be amputated.

As the surgeon turned to Joe Jolly, Jack Drew, who was within reach, plucked him aside and said something to him in a whisper. The two conversed then for a minute or two in low tones, when, with an approving nod, the doctor went back and made a hasty examination of Jolly's wound.

"My friend," the surgeon finally said, "I'd as well be plain with you: there is no hope for you. You'll have to die, and if you have any business to attend to, or anything to say, do so at once—while your mind is clear and you have strength."

A groan escaped Joe's lips, then he became silent. It was evident that to his physical pain the doctor's solemn words had added mental anguish.

Jack Drew sat down by his side and endeavored to cheer him up. Surgeon Gaines dressed his wounds, then, as he turned away, again said:

"I am sorry, Joe, but I cannot save you."

The doctor, assisted by Ichabod Flea, who was himself something of a surgeon, attended to the wounded and soon had all their injuries temporarily dressed.

By this time Ajax had fully recovered from his shock and seemed quite strong, bearing his great suffering with a fortitude characteristic of the man.

Poor Bob Boscobel seemed to be the greatest sufferer of them all, the fear of losing his leg distressing him as much as his pain. And this must he endure in dread uncertainty till morning.

The dead were laid aside and covered with a blanket to await burial on the morrow.

A number of wounded Indians, and two or three outlaws, still lay moaning and cursing on the field; and forgetting, with true Christian spirit and human feeling, that they were enemies, their wounds were also dressed by the surgeon and Ichabod.

Jack Drew remained constantly by Jolly's side, talking to him with all the kindness and fervency of a spiritual adviser. The old detective scout seemed more than anxious that the dying man should be prepared to go into the presence of his Maker. Finally Jolly seemed to rally from his stupor, and in a voice full of agony exclaimed:

"Oh, my God! Jack, it's terrible for me to have to die this way! I am not prepared to die, Jack."

Both Bandy and Rattler overheard him and went and sat down by him, one at his feet, the other on the side opposite Jack Drew.

After a few moments' pause the wounded man continued:

"I have not lived, Jack, as I would like to die, a good man. I have done—"

Here his strength seemed to leave him. He appeared to be sinking fast. Drew became restless and excited. He bent over the man, and looking down into his eyes, asked:

"Isn't there somethin' you want to say, Joe?"

The wounded man nodded his head.

"Joe," again asked the old detective, "can't you tell me something about that robbery and murder at Bird's Ranch?"

Jolly started and stared wildly at the old man.

"Have you ever mistrusted me, Jack?" he asked, his voice growing stronger.

"By your talk, Joe, I always thought you knew something about that affair. If you do, it can do you no harm now to tell it, and may do great good and justice to others. I know this, Joe, your name is not Jolly, but Janeway. You drove the stage into Bird's Ranch that eventful night and bore witness against Carson and Fielding."

"Jack, I know all about that affair," Jolly declared.

Kit Bandy started, a look of surprise sweeping over his face.

Tom Rattler smiled grimly, while an expression of satisfaction rested upon the composed features of Jack Drew.

After another pause Jolly continued:

"Yes, Jack, my true name is Sam Janeway. I was the driver that took the stage into Bird's Ranch that night, and it was the Express messenger, Gilbert Finwick, and myself that planned and executed that robbery."

"Horn o' Joshua!" involuntarily burst from the lips of the astonished Kit Bandy, as he turned his eyes toward Old Rattler.

"But who killed Finwick, Joe?" Drew questioned, never taking his eyes from the face of the wounded man.

"We planned and executed the robbery," Joe repeated. "The storm favored us. So did Carson and Fielding by sleeping in the coach with Finwick. When they got out along in the night Finwick left the coach with the money. I was in the stable close by watching. I saw the men go back into the coach and close the door. Then I ran out and started after Finwick. To my surprise I met him coming back empty-handed, and by a prolonged flash of lightning I saw a man on horseback galloping away from the direction Finwick was coming. I asked him about the money—where he'd put it, and he told me a friend had met him and he'd sent the money off, but that I need not worry—that I should have my share. Instantly it struck me that Finwick was playing me a trick, for no third party had ever been mentioned in our plans. I accused him of trying to deceive me. One word brought on another—we quarreled, and I drew a dagger and stabbed him to the heart. I struck him a second blow before he fell. The blade struck a rib and the point broke off and remained in his body. He died without a

groan. I threw the broken dagger into the raging creek near and went back to the dug-out where all knew I had gone to spend the night. The storm washed out all traces of the crime, and poor Carson and Fielding were in for it."

With a long-drawn breath of relief, Jack Drew raised his eyes and glanced at Old Kit Bandy, whose face wore a look of profound astonishment.

Tom Rattler sat chewing the ends of his scanty whiskers, a peculiar light in his keen gray eyes that Bandy could not understand the meaning of at that time.

"Then you never got any of the money?" Old Jack observed, after a moment's silence.

"Not one cent," Jolly answered: "I never knew who the man was that met Finwick. I never regretted killing the messenger, but poor Carson and Fielding! I have always felt that they should be exonerated from the crime; and although Carson cannot be brought back, his name can be cleared of that stain, and Howard Fielding, if living, can be recalled from exile. Now, all this is true—the words of a dying man. I hope all that I have sinned against will forgive me as I hope for forgiveness at the bar of God. Do not tell this to Edith until I am dead."

"All right, Joe," said Drew; "I know you can die easier now, and that there will be hope for you beyond this life."

Jack remained by Jolly's side a long time, giving him a chance to say all he wished to, then, relieved by Dick Randall, he walked over to where Bandy and Rattler were talking, and put the question straight to Bandy:

"Say, Kit, what do you think now 'bout Fielding's guilt?—'bout gettin' the five thousand reward you've been workin' for these months and months?"

"Jack Drew, you ole scoundrel!" exclaimed Kit, "I feel like deestroyin' somethin'. Tom Rattler tells me he's been hunter and scout for Howard Fielding this year or more. Is it any wonder I've been hornswoggled, bamboozled, idioticed? With everything evil and cunnin' conspirin' against me, is it any wonder I couldn't find Fielding's retreat? The man don't live that can fight Ingins and outlaws twenty-four hours a day, and then circumvent the wolfish, rascally, jassackish deception o' sich apostles o' meanness as Tom Rattler and Jack Drew. It hurts me to think Tom'd turn 'ginst me after I have been so kind to him these years. Time and ag'in have I saved his life; I have shared him blanket and my last quarter o' venison with my. We have drank from the same—spring, mingled our blood on the field o' battle fightin' redskins like the legions o' Rome. We have slept together, eat together, hunted together, and lied together so often and so easy that I'd come to regard Tom as my twin brother."

"But thar's one consolation, and that is that this is the fu'st time Kit Bandy has been Outwitted; and then it took Ingins, outlaws, Jack Drew, Tom Rattler and the devil to accomplish it."

"Still, after all, I'm glad Fielding is an innocent man, and Tom Rattler had a chance to do some good in this world. Tom, do you git that gal?"

"No; Frank Damon, the young scamp, has got her soul and body, head and heart," Rattler answered.

"That's good, you old fraud," Bandy exclaimed; "I'll go a thousand miles after this to cut you out o' a pretty gal if I should hear one'd broke out o' the Lunatic Asylum and war cottonin' to you. But, Thomas Rattler and Jackson Drew, go bring forth to the world Howard Fielding and his fambly, for How. is an innocent man by virtue o' that dyin' confession o' Jolly's."

"I thought so from the first time I looked into the case," said Drew. "Puttin' a hundred little things together, as we fellers do sometimes, I arrived at the conclusion that Sam Janeway knew somethin' o' that crime, and I have worked him constantly for three years, and at last the truth has come out. If you'd taken the case right at the beginnin', Kit, you'd had the facts long ago; but takin' it, second-handed, as you did put you after the wrong man. True, you run Fielding close, and it required all of Tom Rattler's skill to keep you off the track. You see I have been in communication with Fielding for three years, and have, with Rattler's aid, kept the family supplied with food, clothing and other necessities and comforts of life. Their hidden home is over in the heart of the Chalk Hills!"

"What! in the Chalk Hills?" exclaimed Bandy, turning upon Rattler as if he would devour him.

"Exactly, Kit."

"Tom Rattler!" cried the old Mountain Detective, "is't possible that the four days I spent searchin' for the home of the Mysterious Girl north of here were days throwed away by your falsehood? Heavens! I'll have to go out and tear up a tree or kick over a mountain afore I do you bodily harm. I'm gittin' wusser and wusser."

"You'll git over that, Kitsie," replied Rattler laughing; "your attacks are alers mild and easy cured."

"Well, go bring Fielding's folks here. Tell 'em they no longer need to fear the great sleuth-hound when a measly old tulip like you can mislead, outwit, deceive and hornswoggle the only great and original old fool, Ka-ristopher Kolumbus Bandy. Go, Tom, and bring them folks; I want to see that gal that's turned the head o' our boys, and used you for a dish-washin', lyin' old fraudulent slave."

Both Rattler and Jack Drew set off for the Chalk Hills, to bring from his long exile, the wronged Howard Fielding.

The night passed slowly. No one attempted to sleep. The soldiers bivouacked in the opening in front of the grotto.

Day finally came. Breakfast was eaten, and then the surgeon went the rounds of his patients.

Much to the surprise of some of the party, Jolly Joe, or Sam Janeway, was still alive and seemed to be resting quite easy, despite the surgeon's predictions that he would soon die.

Bob Boscobel was the greatest sufferer, but the almost constant ministrations of the fair Edith Dustan had much to do in alleviating his physical and mental pain.

Brave Ajax lay stretched upon his back in much misery, but he was as cheerful as it was possible for a man in his condition to be.

Along about ten o'clock a flutter of excitement was created by the announcement that Jack Drew and Rattler had returned from the Chalk Hills, accompanied by no less than five persons.

Old Kit rushed from the grotto and met the party in front of the place. Rattler introduced him to Howard Fielding.

The latter was a white-haired, white-bearded man of fifty years, with a clear, open and manly countenance—such as was never possessed by a murderer or villain.

At her father's side walked the Mysterious Girl of the Hills, a fair, dark-eyed, and strikingly beautiful girl of eighteen.

A young man of twenty, dressed in a hunter's garb, was with the party. He was Fielding's son. At his side was Judith Bonnet, the outlaw's daughter. The fifth person was a middle-aged Irishwoman, the servant of the Fieldings.

"Welcome to life and freedom, Howard Fielding," Old Kit said as he grasped the man's hand. "I've carried a warrant for your arrest these months, but owin' to the multitudinous deception o' Tom Rattler, and the presence of death, the wind's all knocked out o' my sails, and I'm glad o' it."

"Thank you, Kit Bandy, for your kind reception," Howard Fielding replied with some emotion.

"And so you're the Mysterious Girl?" Old Kit finally said, turning to Miss Fielding; "well, I don't wonder at the boys bein' all tore up 'bout your screamin' pretty face!"

The girl blushed scarlet, and as soon as she could recover from her embarrassment, replied:

"Mr. Bandy, I've heard of you before. Tom Rattler told me all about you."

"I'll bet on Tom Rattler tellin' everything and more, too. Tom war always frightful jealous o' me when ladies war around, but for all that Tom's a noble, big-hearted fraud, Miss Fielding. I love the fellow for the rascally goodness that's in him."

"He has been a good, true friend to us," said the girl, hardly knowing how to take Bandy's paradoxical observations.

"Pardon me, Mr. Fielding," suddenly exclaimed Old Kit, as a thought occurred to him; "let me introduce you to the rest o' our folks."

And while he was thus engaged Judith Bonnet was taken by Tom Rattler to the bedside of Ajax.

"Ajax, my noble friend!" the girl cried, "I am told you are badly hurt!"

Ajax put out his hand and clasped that of the weeping girl, and, with a smile of joy, responded:

"I'll get along in time, Miss Bonnet; but I am so glad you have come."

As Judith listened to his low, quivering voice,

once so strong and manly, and felt the trembling of the great arm that had wrought such powerful blows in her behalf, it was only by a great effort that she could keep from breaking down.

To Ajax, Judith Bonnet was a ministering angel in the days and weeks that he was to pass in suffering. With the devotion born of woman's love she tended at his bedside almost day and night for three long weeks, so that when the young mountaineer was able to leave his bed she was well-nigh worn out. But the reward she received afterward amply repaid her for all the sacrifice she had made.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CURTAIN GOES DOWN.

FOR over four weeks Alcove Grotto was quite a hospital.

To his great joy Bob Boscobel did not lose his leg, but recovered quite rapidly.

Contrary to the surgeon's decision Sam Janeway did not die, but continued to improve right along. In fact, Old Kit mistrusted that the fellow was not nearly so bad off as the doctor had claimed. He believed that Gaines had given his decision, or the one he did give, by Jack Drew's request in order to get a confession from him. Whether such a course was right or not we leave the reader to judge, but, right or wrong, it proved successful in getting the confession.

The soldiers drove the Indians out of the hills, and Bill Monday having died from the effects of Ajax's shot in the head—as was learned from a wounded outlaw—all that was left of the Bonnet-Mondays disappeared from the country; and so during the party's stay at the grotto they had nothing to fear from that source.

One day Tom Rattler proposed a visit to the Chalk Hills and the wonderful cavern where Fielding had so long remained secreted. The proposition was readily accepted and a party set off for the place. Kit Bandy was one of them.

The cavern had been discovered by Fielding himself some years previous while prospecting for gold in that region, little dreaming at the time it would ever serve him as a place of refuge from the power of those who would hang him for a crime of which he was innocent.

Great, indeed, was the surprise of all when Rattler led them into the cavern at the place where the mountain stream, heretofore mentioned, disappeared underground. By moving a small rock the waterfall was pressed aside, and by the removal of another stone, an opening large enough to admit a person to the cave was made.

The party was for hours exploring the weird, winding passages and darksome chambers of the place. Finally they turned their footsteps toward the grotto feeling fully repaid for the trip.

On the way back to camp, when about two miles or so from the Chalk Hills, Tom Rattler stopped suddenly, and pointing at the base of a tall, slender needle rock asked:

"Do you see that, Kitsie Bandy?"

All saw engraved in rude letters on the rock the words "BIG LIAR."

"What master hand done that? Yours, Tom?" queried old Kit.

"It didd," responded Rattler, with an air of pride.

"What for? To advertise your wares?"

"No, Kitsie; when I fu'st met Ajax and his friends weeks ago, they told me you were dead—had been hung by the Bonnet-Mondays for snookin' round too previous in their neighborhood. As soon as I was alone, and had time, I sot down and wept a Dead Sea o' briny tears for my b'loved old friend. Then I rose resolved to 'rect a monument to your memory. I'd heard the Bible story 'bout 'Absalom's Place,' and concluded I'd heap together a great heap o' stone and call it 'Bandy's Pile,' but when I found it'd take too much work to do my b'loved friend justice, I turned to this towerin' rock and engraved upon it them words, knowin' that everybody in the Territory that see'd 'em would know whose memory they commemorated."

"Oh, you sacrilegious bushranger!" exclaimed old Kit, "I've a notion to blot out the words with your carcass!"

The crowd burst into a hearty laugh, in which old Kit joined, and then, lifting his hat and bowing with mock reverence to his own monument, the old detective led the way onward through the hills.

As soon as the wounded were able to travel they were removed to the nearest mining-town

and placed in comfortable quarters, where every kindness was shown them until they had all fully recovered.

Bandy and Jack Drew went at once to Bird's Station, where Finwick had been buried, and had the body disinterred. Nothing but the bones of the murdered man remained, but in these—in one of his left ribs near the heart, was the rust-covered point of a dagger. It had broken off flush with the outside of the bone, but the point projected through about an inch on the inside. As no post-mortem examination was held at the time of the inquest, this fact escaped unnoticed.

The finding of the dagger-point verified Sam Janeway's confession, and closed the mouths of some of Jolly's friends, who charged that he had been frightened by Jack Drew into making a confession, the very words of which, it was claimed, Jack put into his—Jolly's—mouth.

In fact, Jolly himself, after he found he was going to recover endeavored to go back on his confession by setting up the plea that he was delirious when he told what he did; but the knife-point swept that claim away, and he paid the penalty of his crime with his life.

Strange, indeed, is the philosophy of human life. It is perverting, contradictory, uncertain. Peculiar things are wrought by merest accident in the lives of men. Out of good deeds often come evil and suffering, and evil is frequently the source of good things. By accident was Frank Damon thrown under the care and protection of Howard Fielding, who was the victim of injustice. The young man's life was saved, and, during his convalescence in the cavern, an intimacy sprang up between him and the fugitive's daughter that finally culminated in dreams of reciprocal love. And then Bob Boscobel and Edith Dustan met with a happy fate when the designs of evil men brought them together, and to-day there are no happier people on earth than Bob and Edith, unless it be that prince of gallant and heroic fellows, Ajax, and his charming, loving wife, Judith.

And to-day, in the hearts of all these happy young people, the memory of no one is cherished more affectionately than that of those gallant old mountaineers, Kit Bandy, Tom Rattler and Jack Drew, and last, but not least, the inimitable Ichabod Flea.

THE END.

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